



MAIL-ORDER MATINGS
To my
**DELIVERED
SERPENTS**

MAZZY J. MARCH

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Delivered to My Serpents
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I'm no shifter. Most of my friends are—of the happily mated wolf variety. A mate, someone forever committed to me seems like a fairy tale to my human ears. My parents were divorced by the time I was five and hadn't found anyone else to love since. My own dating life taught me that love is for romance novels. It happens to people like me.

When my friends dare me to get on the Mail-Order Matings app, where they found their mates, I protest that it was only for shifters, but they show me different. Then they put their money behind the dare.

I have to spend ninety days with the first match on my profile and not fall for my mate to collect a cash prize. I can certainly use the money, and I will never fall in love.

Delivered to My Serpents is Book 15 in the super sweet with building heat Mail-Order Matings Series. Delivered to My Serpents features a female who doesn't believe in love but two serpents who can help her lose her bet, and of course, Mazzy promises a happy ever after. If you like true mates, Fate taking a hand, and smart, protective serpent shifters one-click Delivered to My Serpents today.

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Delivered to My Serpents
Mail-Order Matings Book 15

By
Mazzy J. March

Chapter One

Jasmine

“Since when did people start throwing birdseed?” Michelle’s mom nudged me with her elbow. “What’s wrong with rice?” She had clung to me for most of the reception. She was the mother of the bride, her ex-husband constantly on the dance floor showing off his own new bride of two weeks. A bride half his former wife’s age and twice as blonde. Glenda touched her tissue to the corners of her eyes as the bride, one of my close friends, climbed into the limo with her husband to be whisked away on their honeymoon.

“There was a myth that birds couldn’t digest uncooked rice. It was confirmed later that they could, in fact, digest it, but birdseed is easier for the venue owners to clean up as well.”

To be honest, I never understood any of the traditions. Throwing rice. Releasing birds.

I did understand the money dance, however.

“Oh. Okay.” Glenda turned around and went back inside. Some people had already left but the friends who had stayed, well, we intended to put the DJ and the rest of the alcohol to good use.

The real party was still waiting inside.

We danced until midnight and then gathered around a small table. A few couples lingered on the dance floor as the DJ ran out of fast songs and was only playing slow ones now.

I loved to slow dance, but the single men had gone for the night. They often left wedding receptions early. I should know. I had been a bridesmaid six times in the last two years.

Tonight, the last of my close friends was married, but I put the idea of forever being single out of my mind. The margaritas didn’t hurt either in that respect.

The centerpieces were gone.

The food was long ago discarded.

My red bridesmaid dress that I would be donating to charity—it was not, as the shop lady claimed, something I’d wear again—was plastered to my sweaty skin from dancing all night.

My heels were...somewhere.

“Jaz, it’s your turn,” Anya said, giggling with a plastic champagne glass in her hand. She pouted toward her mate, Sam, and he shook his head. She’d been cut off for the night.

“My turn to call an Uber, get out of here with a chunk of wedding cake in my hands? I agree.”

Beth kicked me under the table. “You know that’s not what she’s talking about, Jasmine. We just want to see you happy.”

I groaned and threw my head back. “Not this again. It’s slim pickings around here. We all know that. Some people simply aren’t meant to get married or mated. I’d love a hot wolf shifter, but I don’t see one around declaring that I’m his fated mate or anything. Can’t we have one wedding or mating ceremony without it ending with the Jasmine-has-no-husband discussion?”

Anya put her elbows on the table and rested her face in her hands, looking at me. She was beyond tipsy, so I knew it was more to keep herself awake than an attempt to be serious. “We love you, Jasmine. We just want you to be happy.”

“Who says I’m not happy? I need a man to make me happy? I have three best friends. I have a great job. I have this killer dress, and I have a full life. Sounds fucking happy to me.”

Okay, even I wasn’t buying my own spiel. I craved the love and commitment the others had. Beth was a shifter, and Anya wasn’t, but they were both mated to shifters. Michelle had mated her bear shifter earlier.

There was something about the vow of a shifter that I wanted in my life.

The total commitment. It was rare and highly forbidden for a shifter to cheat. I had never been cheated on myself, but the fear of it loomed whenever I dated someone.

My father had cheated on my mother and, while the biggest wound of that betrayal belonged to her, it rippled into my life and my choices.

I never wanted to have my heart broken the way hers was.

My dad didn’t even stay with the woman. As soon as he divorced my mom, she left him.

Neither of my parents had married since.

Beth took my hand in hers. “There aren’t many choices around here. That’s why we got on the Mail-Order Matings app. You know this. What

would it hurt if you tried?”

Both Beth and Anya’s mates got up to help put away tables, giving us a bit of privacy.

We had this discussion after every ceremony. I was about as sick of it as Anya would be tomorrow morning.

“I could get on there and have no matches?” I said, revealing the real reason I hadn’t followed their lead and downloaded the app. Sure, it seemed like a good way to meet a mate, especially since my best friends were loved and content with the mates they found there, but there was also something awkward about it.

Plus, I didn’t want to get hurt.

And the fear of getting my heart broken was the deciding factor in all my dating and relationships thus far.

“Oh, come on. Give me a break. You are gorgeous, and you know it.”

“There’s more to it than that, Beth. You can’t truly know someone through an app and I’m not a shifter, so I can’t just run up and smell them. I...even people who are in a relationship don’t ever really know each other.”

“That’s not true,” Anya said. “Besides, that’s what the getting-to-know-you period is for. Most matches on the app take ninety days to get to know each other.”

“I dare you,” Beth said, squaring her shoulders. “Sign up for the app. Look around, and I bet you will have some matches.”

I didn’t take her seriously because she was a little drunk. Her cheeks were even flushed.

“Yeah. Okay. I’ll do that.”

“Yes!” Anya said, standing and then almost falling. “All the things. Apps. Mates. Bets. Monies.”

Gods alive, she was more drunk than I thought.

They would never remember this bet or dare—whatever the hell it was.

Chapter Two

Naga

My stomach rumbled, but I ignored it in favor of the task on the screen.

“Eat something, Naga.” Drake pushed his half-eaten bag of chips in my direction with a low growl.

“I’d rather go hungry than to eat that shit.” I turned the bag around before the smell of cheese powder and franken-seasoning blend hit my nose again.

He chuckled. “Then go upstairs and eat. Your stomach is irritating me, and I’m trying to finish up this project.”

Everything irritated Drake when he was immersed in a project. He was completing an intelligence report for some secret government agency. I never understood why they didn’t have their own analysts, or at least chose not to use them, but we didn’t care.

The money in the bank was worth it to keep our mouths shut and our questions to ourselves.

I pushed back from the desk and took a moment to stretch, pulling my arms over my head and bending left and right to extend the movement.

I took the stairs up to the main part of the house, feeling the tug in my calves from sitting too long. We had standing desks, and sometimes I did stand, but for the most part, we sat, hunching over our desks for hours and, in today’s case, not eating breakfast or lunch.

The setting sun filtered through the windows that lined the back of our home. I sighed in response to the lavenders and pale roses that painted a backdrop to the trees around our house. Another day spent in the dungeon, as Drake called it. Tucked away from the world. From the sunlight. From any chance of connection with the outside world.

I heated up some leftover rotisserie chicken and made some sandwiches for myself and Drake. Sandwiches were fine with me, and our work was fulfilling, but things were getting stale for me.

They were for Drake as well. We weren’t complainers, for the most part. It was part of our therapy. See the good. Look for the positive. Try to be one part better every day.

Flowery words, but the person who gave them to us to chant had no clue what it was like for us to be in our bodies, bearing the scars of what we had been through when we were deployed. Sure, each of us had sessions where we divulged details and experiences we would otherwise never speak of, but they were simply that—words.

No one could feel the wounds for us. Hear the zipping of bullets or the booms of explosions. Civilians didn't know the way the ground shook when a tank drove by or hear the cries of children even when there were none around.

They could listen and sympathize, but the experience wouldn't ever be threaded through them like it was for us.

I downed the sandwiches while listening to the crickets and frogs alert us that night was on the way.

"Those for me?" Drake asked, shutting the door to the basement behind him. It had a keypad entry system and only we knew the code. There were layers upon layers of confidential information down there. We couldn't take a chance.

There was information in our basement office that could topple societies and bring down the financial structures of at least two countries.

The thought was heavy, but it also provided a sense of job security.

No one would fire us. We knew too much.

"Yeah. It's not enough though. I'm still hungry."

Drake nodded while inhaling one of the sandwiches in two bites. He finished chewing and then said, "I got it."

"Did you finish up?" I asked while he took out the eggs and a few other things.

"I did. It's all sent. I sent a copy to myself and a blind copy to our encrypted email. Everything is on a drive and already in the safe."

I snorted. "My stomach must've really been bothering you. Once I left, you made quick work."

He sighed. "It wasn't your stomach. It was me. Sometimes I hesitate when finishing up a report because that means it's a start of a new one."

The monotony of our lives had slithered under our skin. Humans. Shifters. All creatures needed routine, yes, but it was the surprises that made life worth living.

There was another issue, of course. Our serpents were hungry for a mate. We'd figured out through our animal's bond that we were meant to

share a mate between us, which made sense. We were best friends. Had endured what hells life had to offer and come out on the other side. We lived together. Worked together.

It didn't make sense to me that we would do anything other than share a mate.

Except, how in the fuck were we supposed to find a mate when we were holed up in our den all day, only coming up for air and sustenance.

The only other person we saw was the errant delivery driver or some person trying to get us to subscribe to their pest control.

We were serpent shifters. We were the pest control.

"Are you done for the night?" I asked Drake as we dug into our second dinner of eggs, pancakes, and bacon.

"Yeah. I'm gonna grab a book and sit outside by the fire."

I nodded. We could've watched movies or TV but, after a long day, the last thing we wanted was another screen. "I might join you."

Chapter Three

Jasmine

“You know we haven’t forgotten, right?”

My stomach instantly curled into a knot. I knew what my friends were talking about, of course, but I would plead ignorance.

Couldn’t they have just let me finish my dessert first?

“About what?” I played the innocent card as well as a lifetime criminal, grasping at any straw to get me out of this.

Beth paused with her fork halfway to her mouth and gave me a dirty look. “That’s not going to work, Jaz. Tell the truth or let me see your phone.”

I snorted. “I thought you two were too drunk to remember.”

“Well, we weren’t. Let me see the phone.” Anya put her hand out, palm up.

Damnit. I was caught. “I didn’t actually sign up for the app,” I confessed.

“You could’ve had a mate by now. Besides, you accepted the bet.”

I laughed. “Like I said, I agree to a lot of things thinking you two are too far gone to remember. Or that I am. Who knows what we’ve all agreed to. Besides, it was a dare.”

“But I do remember. And I’m serious. You accepted.”

“Girls, I don’t want to. Maybe I’m just permanently the bridesmaid. I’m okay with that.”

“Are you?” Anya said. “If you can’t be honest with your best friends, then who? Don’t you want a mate...or two...maybe three?”

I sighed. They already knew the truth as well as I did. I wanted a mate, but pretending that I didn’t or acting aloof was sometimes easier.

And less painful.

“I’m fine,” I reiterated.

Beth sat back, crossing her arms over her chest. “Anya, I think it’s time we sweetened the deal. Make it a bet. Don’t you?”

“Huh?” I sputtered, not able to resist the temptation. When Beth made a deal, it was a real one. All high stakes, which was why I had avoided most of them until now.

“She is up to her eyeballs in debt,” Anya said. “And when I mated, my trust fund kicked in.”

“I have some to put in too.”

I rolled my eyes. “Who said anything about how much debt I’m in? We’re talking about some app that you two have had great success with but likelihood of the same outcome is dismal at best.”

Beth leaned forward and squinted, which scared me more than I was willing to admit. “Get on the app. Give the first match you get ninety days, and we’ll pay off all your debts. No payoff. Just a gift.”

I cracked up, but my friends didn’t. “What? You can’t be serious.”

“I’m serious. First match. Go and meet with them. Ninety days. And the best rule: Don’t fall in love with them.”

“Wait a damned minute,” I said, putting my hands up. “Accept the first match. Go and visit with strangers for ninety days and don’t fall in love. If I do that, I get all my debts paid off? Doesn’t sound like a challenge, girls.”

Anya scoffed. “I’m telling you, that app knows what it’s doing. It will be a challenge. Especially if you have hunky, amazing mates like ours. You won’t be able to resist.”

“And neither will they or him. If you get there, and your match thinks you’re their fated mate, there’s no way they’re letting you get away. Shifters don’t put anything above their fated mates.”

I’d been working my ass off to make a dent in my debt but had only managed to carve out a small hole. Being debt free would change my life and, although my friends had great luck in finding their mates, I didn’t mean we all could.

“All my debt?” I asked.

Beth nodded. “All of it.”

“Shake on it.” I jutted my hand out, still not believing how easy this would be. Not fall in love with strangers. How hard could it be? Not hard at all.

Beth and Anya both shook my hands, but Anya added a new term. “You have to sign up today. Now. There’s a ton of questions you have to answer. Come on. Out with the phone. Your mates are waiting.”

“Not waiting,” I said, making them laugh. “Let’s get this bet started.”

Anya wasn’t wrong. Along with making a profile, there were hundreds of questions all aimed at making the best match possible. Everything from

personality traits to how many mates I expected to have. One. two. Three. Entire harems. Shifters. Monsters. Creatures I'd never heard of were all on the app, searching for their mate or mates.

Breeders.

Protection seekers.

Everyone was represented.

Even humans like me who would accept love no matter human, monster, or shifter.

But for this bet, love wasn't on the table. In fact, it was out of the question if I was to win.

By the time we were done signing up, the waiter was giving us that when-are-you-going-to free-up-my-table look, so we made sure to tip well.

I was all signed up but as we parted ways, I had a sinking feeling my life was about to change forever.

Chapter Four

Drake

An unspoken subject hung between my best friend and me. We danced around it, wanting to keep our loneliness and dwindling hope a bit private, even though we shared every other aspect of our lives.

Our serpents were desperate for our mate.

Whoever she was.

Wherever she was.

And while I believed wholeheartedly in fate, our lifestyle was giving Fate a run for her money.

We weren't going to find our mate huddled in the dark depths of our basement.

Naga and I used to talk about finding our mate all the time. We dated a bit after returning from our tour in the Middle East. We looked for her in every female face we encountered, but our serpents simply hadn't found the one meant for us. We hadn't lived as monks until the last year or so when we stopped going to bars or anywhere to meet females.

We'd given up somewhere along the line, gave in to not finding her.

It wasn't a decision really, rather, our lives started living us instead of the other way around.

I woke up early as the sun came into my room. Already, I could hear the churning and dribble of the coffee as it filled the pot. The smell of freshly brewed caffeination woke me up, partially, even before I lifted my head from the pillow.

Naga was already up and, from the sounds that followed the coffeepot, was already cooking breakfast.

He had something on his mind.

I knew my best friend.

We had both started new projects the night before, and the first week was usually a slow one. We were setting up things. Letting our programs do most of the work for us. After the first week or two, as the deadlines loomed and our clients began nagging for information, our work would become more frantic and pushed.

We moved slowly those first weeks.

“Good morning,” I gruffed, my throat rough and gravelly from waking up only a half hour ago. My hair was still wet on the ends from my shower, droplets splashing onto the back of my neck.

“Morning,” Naga answered, sliding a cup of coffee over to me. He took his black, like a villain, and I loved a bit of coffee with my creamer. One taste and I was in heaven.

While Naga cooked breakfast, I saw his back muscles pulled taut. His shoulders were rigid. His movements stiff and almost overly calculated.

I was right. Naga had something on his mind.

“Spit it out,” I said as he placed a heaping bowl of oatmeal in front of me.

“What?” He feigned ignorance but it was short-lived. “Fine, I saw something early this morning while I was checking my personal email.”

“Something bad? A fire we need to put out?”

He shook his head. “No. Nothing work related and nothing from our families. It was a spam email and, in trying to delete it, I clicked on it.”

My hackles went up. “Virus?”

Naga cocked his head sideways. “Drake, no. Not a virus or anything bad.”

“A week’s vacation in a tropical paradise? Did you win the lottery? Spit it out already.”

The lottery would be nice if I hadn’t seen all those stories about how winning millions had ruined many winners’ lives.

“The spam email led me to an app.”

“What kind of app?” I asked, curious but only because whatever this advertisement was, already it had made some kind of impression on Naga. Not a lot of things surprised us anymore, especially in the tech realm.

“An app for shifters and humans and monsters to...to find their mate or mates, whichever the case may be.” He didn’t look at me while he spoke, his eyes downcast, pretending to focus on his breakfast.

“Like a dating app?” I asked.

He looked up at me, pinning me with a serious stare as his dark eyebrows bunched over his nose. “Except not dating. Mating. This is a way for shifters to find their mates. I mean, there are other relationships included, but mainly it’s for mates to find each other.”

“Did you download it?” I asked, wondering how far he’d taken this avenue.

“I wanted to talk to you first. But I checked it out. It’s legit and they have a 99 percent success rate with matches.”

“Sounds like you’ve already made your decision,” I said, pushing away my bowl in favor of the conversation.

“I want to sign up but we know that our serpents would share a mate. It has to be a decision we both make.”

“Send me the email, please.”

Naga forwarded me the email from Mail-Order Matings. I clicked the link and found a website where shifters, monsters, and creatures in between had found their mates. Shifters seeking humans. Humans seeking monsters. Monsters seeking breeders. Orcs. Dragon shifters. Gargoyles. Some creatures I’d never even heard of.

Then again, most folks didn’t realize that serpent shifters existed either.

I put my phone down. “Naga, do you think we will find our mate on here?” I tapped the phone with my pointer finger.

“It’s worth a try. We sure as hell aren’t going to find her in the basement.”

I snorted. He wasn’t wrong. “Then let’s try it.”

Naga’s face lit up. He was as ready and willing to find a mate as I was and more than we were willing to admit out loud.

We spent over an hour signing up and going through the painstaking questionnaire process. By the time we were done, I was ready to get to my work to get my mind off of relationship and sexual questions.

This just might work though.

Chapter Five

Jasmine

The bet I made with Beth and Anya said that I had to pick the first match on the app.

But the first match was an orc throuple wanting a fourth. Wasn't exactly a match for me, but they contacted me anyway.

The app said I was only 23 percent compatible.

I wasn't betting my life or my financial future on 23 percent. I swiped off it and looked at all my options. Packs of wolf shifters seeking omegas. Harems looking for a female pivot.

My second match was a pair of shifters and, as I explored their profile, I saw they were serpent shifters.

Serpents? Like snakes? A popular movie franchise with a basilisk hidden in a secret underground lair conjured up visions in my mind.

Here I was expecting a hot wolf shifter or maybe dragon.

No way I would fall in love, according to the bet, but there was no reason I couldn't have a good time while I was there.

I went back to their pictures. Drake and Naga looked similar. Both had short haircuts, but Naga had a bit of gray in his despite being in his late twenties. Drake had a well-kept beard, while Naga was clean-shaven.

They were lean but their black T-shirts strained against their biceps and shoulder muscles. Naga wasn't smiling, but Drake was.

Serpent shifters sounded like a good way to win the bet. Perhaps they were cold and lifeless. Slithering through life. Shedding their emotional skin at every chance possible. The word unfeeling came to mind.

And unfeeling would make me a shoo-in to win this bet. I hated when men were emotionally unavailable, showing no love or care. Not bothering to give as much as they took.

Maybe they would fuck me and let me leave without any attachments.

I texted Beth and Anya and we began a video chat. I sent them screenshots of Naga and Drake and told them everything on their profile.

They didn't bat an eye at serpent shifters.

"This was the first match?" Beth asked.

“No, but the first one was a throuple of orcs who were looking for a fourth. I’m not doing that. I don’t care what the bet terms were.”

They got a kick out of that. Once they stopped laughing, I got serious. I had to admit there was something about Naga and Drake that called to me. Even while Beth and Anya were laughing and carrying on, I was staring at their pictures.

Maybe it was the eyes, but despite my judgments that they would be cold, they held an undeniable warmth.

“So, what do you think?” I asked.

“It’s the first *real* match, I will admit that. And those were the terms, babe.” Beth leaned in to the camera. “Have you accepted the match? Sent them a message? Huh?” She winked. “They are sexy. I’m not sure you can resist.”

I shot her the best stink eye I could. “I can resist. Trust me.”

Anya nodded. “I’m in agreement. You’re in danger here, though, Jasmine. Beth’s right. They are damned sexy.”

“There are attractive people all around the world, but I’m not panting after any of them. What do I do next? Just accept the match or message them?”

Beth shrugged. “Depends on how fast you want that debt taken care of.”

Today. Now.

“I’m sending them a message. No big deal. Ninety days, and this is over, and I’m free.”

Beth ended the video chat, but Anya stayed on a bit. “Good luck, Jasmine. Personally, I’m hoping you fall head over heels for those two. We want to see you happy more than anything else.”

I wanted to be happy and in love and secure with someone who would be kind and considerate too.

Someone who would cherish me.

Someone I could cherish in return.

But it wasn’t these two. These two were a means to an end. An end to an era that couldn’t come quickly enough.

I quickly sent a message to them and then put my phone down.

It was about time something in my life changed.

Chapter Six

Naga

My body was crying out for me to get up. My back twanged with aching pain. My upper torso pulled between my shoulder blades. The tugging in my neck. All of these things could no longer be denied.

I needed to get up and stretch. Not to mention, nausea from a day filled with sustenance but nothing close to a real meal.

The second my ass came off the chair, a chime came from my personal laptop. I usually didn't even bring it down here but, after signing up for the mating app, I had to. Especially since my phone was upstairs charging.

Drake stopped typing, and our eyes met. Even in the darkness, the only lights coming from our computers and a small lamp on the other side of the room, his green eyes bored into me.

We were both more than eager to see if this mating app would prove its worth.

I leaned over and clicked on the notification to see what it was. It said, you have a match.

My hand shook as I watched the window enlarge and go straight to the mating site.

"What is it?" Drake asked, leaning back in his chair.

"We have a match."

"Who?" Drake poised his hand over the keyboard. I knew what he was up to. We had to be careful about who we let in this house. Maybe we were paranoid, but in our business, we had some enemies. Plus, if the wrong person had access to the millions of files and information we had, it could be a disaster.

"Her name is Jasmine Cross."

He huffed a breath out of his nose. "She sounds like a spy."

I laughed but sat back down, doing some research of my own. I didn't tell Drake how beautiful she was or that the shape of her body could make a grown man weep.

He would find that out on his own.

“She doesn’t look like a spy,” I replied, watching my friend lean toward his monitor.

“No fucking kidding. Are you looking at her socials?”

I nodded. “Yep. She’s a book cover designer. Romance novels, looks like.” I didn’t know a lot about fictional book covers but from the responses to her work online, it seemed like she had created a good career for herself.

“She could be on a damned cover.”

I chuckled. “You’re not wrong. What else are you seeing?”

“Looks like her parents are alive, but there are only pictures on holidays. Lots of friends. Was just a bridesmaid in a wedding. Fantastic credit but lots of debt. Student loans mostly. No criminal history. No warrants. The only place she’s traveled to is Mexico and Belize on some cruise right after turning eighteen.”

I clicked through pictures, not seeing anything different than what he was seeing. “So she’s not a Russian spy?” I asked.

“Shut up. You know we have to be careful.”

I did.

“She sent us a message, Drake.”

He finally looked up from the screen. “What did she say?”

“Hello, Naga and Drake. I’m interested in getting to know both of you better. I look forward to hearing from you.”

“Finding someone through something so cold as a website feels so distant.”

I hadn’t realized my best friend was so old-fashioned. “I think you’re putting a limitation on Fate, Drake. The regular methods haven’t worked. What is your serpent telling you?”

“He wants her. He’s already anchoring himself to the idea that she belongs to us.”

Mine was as well. “What’s our next move?”

He shook his head, tapping his lip as he continued to stare at Jasmine’s picture.

“I want to see her. See how she talks. Watch the way she moves. Hear her voice. See her smile. Can we ask for a video chat?”

“Of course we can. We have to accept the match first. You’re sure about her?”

Drake looked up, nodding. “Yeah. But we’re in this together. What’s your animal saying?”

I felt the corners of my lips draw upward into a smile. Yeah, Drake and I shared our laughs on a day-to-day basis, but this was different. A surge of hope built in my chest.

My serpent wanted Jasmine to be ours, and I told my best friend so.

“You’re messaging her, or am I?” he asked.

“I’ll do it. I’m already on the website.”

I sent Jasmine a message and let a whoosh of breath flow out of me. “It’s done.” I shut the laptop or I’d spend the rest of the evening staring at her pictures, which my serpent very much wanted me to.

“Now we wait again?” Drake asked.

“Now we wait. In the meantime, let’s get something real to eat.”

Waiting was the worst part, but a part of me knew that Jasmine would be worth it, even if we had to wait a lifetime.

Chapter Seven

Jasmine

They want to video chat.

And for some reason, that terrifies me.

There is no reason that it should. After all, I've talked to men online and in video chat before. It was hard to be a person of my generation without those things happening. Regular phone calls? Nah. If it needed more than text, more than a DM, then video it was.

But it was one thing to look at the photos in their profile and to exchange typed words. To tell my friends I was taking them up on their bet and going to hook up with my first realistic match. Unfortunately, those things used up most of my bravado.

Still, how could I say no? Sure, I could use the money that the bet would give me when I won. And of course I'd win. I wasn't going to fall head over heels in love with anyone in ninety days, much less with these two shifters.

I reminded myself that my friends had been long-term singles, too, before they met their matches at Mail-Order Matings, so no wonder they were fans of not only the app but the guys who could be found there. But even before that, they'd dated fewer losers than me.

I brought up the images again and studied them. Incredibly good-looking. I didn't consider myself ugly or gorgeous, just average, and guys this handsome had a tendency to make me a little nervous.

But in this case, I was gonna have to be all in. After all, how could I back out? Stifling my nerves, I sent them a reply. *I'll be glad to video chat with you in about an hour.* I didn't mention why the delay, but as soon as I hit send, I ran for the bathroom to do my hair and makeup. I also put on a cute top but left on the ragged shorts I'd donned for my day of work at home. Nobody was going to know what I wore below the waist.

I pulled my hair out of the high ponytail I'd yanked it into this morning and gave it a quick brush then considered using the straightener, but I'd been trying to avoid all the heat. It really damaged the color and the hair itself, and the soft waves falling over my shoulders weren't too bad. Makeup...I jerked open the drawer next to the sink and looked at the

sad display. The kind of job I did required very little glamour, at least on my face, but I had bought a few things for Michelle's wedding, fortunately. After doing my best to make myself look as put together as possible, I went into the bedroom and tried to decide what top might be best. The off-the-shoulder ivory? The pale-blue tank? Maybe one of my many funny book T-shirts? I found one with *Shifters Do It In the Woods* but decided that wasn't a message I was ready to send. Besides...did serpents even like the forest? Where did they hang out anyway? The very word serpent implied such far-off and exotic places like maybe somewhere in Asia or South America...maybe Africa? Anywhere but the small town I lived in here in the US.

While I pondered this, the minutes ticked away until I just had time to change from my current T-shirt with *Banned Books are My Jam* into the pale-blue tank that someone, I thought it was Michelle, said made my eyes extra blue. I ran back to the living room and found my phone then filled a glass with water, my throat dry from nerves, and sat on the sofa to wait for their call.

Exactly one hour after our last call, the phone rang, and I sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly before connecting. It was just a bet... nothing serious, so there was no reason to be scared or nervous or even worried. "Hello."

I was speaking to a blank screen, the video not having come in yet, but when it did, the dry throat turned into a tickle that had me coughing my head off. Perfect.

"Jasmine? Are you all right?" Drake, the one with the beard asked. "Are you choking?"

I gulped water, shaking my head and wishing I had a free hand to cover the screen. "I-I just need a...a second." Another big drink of water lubricated my throat but did nothing for the humiliation. You only make a first impression once, and mine was of a red-faced woman drinking what they probably thought was vodka or something. "I'm sorry. A tickle in my throat."

"Okay now?" Naga, every bit as handsome as his friend but clean-shaven, asked. "Do you need anything? Cough drops?"

What were they going to do? Order them delivered? "No, really. Sometimes when I get a little nervous, I get a dry throat."

“We made you nervous?” Drake’s perplexed expression eased my anxiety, as did Naga’s soft smile.

“We’re not scary,” Naga went on. “It’s just the serpent thing, right?”

“No, not at all.” I paused. “Well, maybe a tiny bit. I’ve never met a serpent shifter before and I guess, even after seeing your pictures, I wasn’t sure what to expect.”

Dang, I was already being more open and vulnerable than I intended. What happened to aloof Jasmine who was not going to be involved in the least?

“And now that you’re talking with us?” Drake cocked a dark, smooth brow.

“Now, I am just trying not to make an even bigger fool of myself.” We talked for about a half hour, all the first-date stuff you might share with someone. Nothing too deep, but at the end, I asked if they would like me to visit. It sounded weird even to me.

Chapter Eight

Drake

Neither of us spoke after the call ended. Naga's body was turned toward me, but his eyes were fixed on something beyond and on nothing. His jaw moved back and forth. Not grinding but testing the hinges.

He lifted his phone and swiped at the screen to make sure the call had ended then put it down and let out a long breath. "That was..."

"Weird?" I finished for him, still trying to figure Jasmine out.

"Sure. Let's go with weird. So it wasn't just me?"

I sat up straighter, taking inventory of my thoughts about what just went on before answering. "She's beautiful and smart." I tried to avoid a negative note, though we had already called the conversation weird.

"She is those things and more, but we knew that before we chatted with her."

"She smiled and asked if she could come here, but the emotion was forced, hollow even." There. I said it.

My serpent vehemently denied that his mate was anything but sincere and willing. His take on the conversation was that she wanted to come here to our home, to his den. He had already opened himself up for a bond with the female. Didn't matter that her words seemed off. Didn't matter that she was human.

He wanted her here with us. Now.

"We investigated her. Thoroughly. I know the last time she shopped online for lingerie and how many recipes she's googled, Drake. There's nothing shady about this female."

"It's in the way she talks. She's overly eager. I don't know if that's a bad thing or not, Naga."

He nodded. "And your serpent isn't? Eager?"

The other side of me slithered around in that part of my consciousness I couldn't explain but was always with me. Serpent shifters transformed shortly after birth, which was why our mothers never went to human hospitals. We would surely be the subject of terrible and disgusting government research. Like lab rats but twenty times worse.

Through our work with information gathering, I had seen more vile parts of the government and its workings than I ever wished to. Horrors that kept me up at night. Shady shit that crawled along my skin during waking hours.

Things that made me want nothing to do with the people in charge, neither the puppets nor the puppeteers.

“He’s calling her mate already. Maybe we’re overanalyzing this. It’s kind of what we do.

You think we’re letting our human sides get in the way?” I asked.

Sometimes, my best friend and I were so alike, and in other ways, we were night and day.

“I want her. It was like looking into the eyes of someone I’d always known, but I was left so confused.” He couldn’t have summed it up better.

“What’s our plan, then? Leave our profile up and wait for another match? Maybe our serpents are so ready for a mate that they will jump at anyone,” I asked.

“That negates everything we know about fated mates, Drake. No matter how needy our beasts are, they would never open themselves up to a bond with someone who wasn’t our mate.”

“Is there a chance Jasmine was simply nervous about potentially mating with two serpent shifters? Imagine being a human female on a mating app. You’re expecting to get matched to a wolf shifter or maybe a lion. You didn’t even know serpent shifters existed. There’s a good chance we’re reading too much into this.”

Naga shook his head. “What are you suggesting?”

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees. “Let’s give her the benefit of the doubt. Message her again. Feel her out. Let our serpents make the decision that clearly we can’t.” Although I was pretty sure they had already made that call. At least mine had.

Naga took three seconds to deliberate. “Let’s message her again.”

We sent her a message asking her more questions. Most, we knew the answers to, but we were comparing notes.

“Tell us more about your work,” I said. I didn’t know much about romance novels, and even less about how the covers were produced.

Instead of messaging us back, she initiated another video chat.

When she popped up on the screen, we saw the real and raw Jasmine. Stripped of makeup. In silky button-up pajamas. Hair up in a whacky bun.

Black-rimmed glasses on her head.

“Hey, guys. I sent you both a link to my website where my custom covers and my pre-mades are listed.”

We had seen the site, of course, but this time, I really looked. The website had been around for years. Anything less would’ve been a bit of a red flag. If she was pretending to be our mate in order to get close to us for nefarious reasons, then the site would be younger. It wasn’t. We even took a look at her PayPal transactions going back to the first week her website launched.

Her book covers, spanning from two people kissing to thorns and roses on the front, weren’t cheap either. Her income didn’t come close to ours, but she made a good living.

“See anything you like?” she asked. “Are you two considering writing a serpent shifter romance?”

Naga snorted. “Of course not. I’ve never even read a romance.”

Her beautiful full lips made an O. “Well, that’s a shame. It’s like a vacation in word form.”

“Reading is a vacation to you?” I asked.

“For me? Yes. All of my friends are mated. I haven’t been as lucky in that department. I pretend it’s okay, but really it’s not. Was that too much information?”

Quite the contrary. It might’ve been the most genuine thing she’d said so far.

“What about your parents? Are you close to them?”

She cocked her head and looked at the ceiling. No matter our qualms, she was adorable like this. No pretenses. No makeup. Sitting in an older lavender velvet chair with the side of her bed barely in view. “I love them. I do. But they are constantly on me about getting married and finding a real job. I see them when the calendar tells me to, you know? How about you two?”

“We rarely talk to our parents. They don’t know how to deal with us after... They say we changed during our overseas service.”

She nodded. “Sometimes people don’t know how to deal with me either. As though I’m someone to be handled. Christmases are awkward to say the least.”

That made me laugh. “Good thing we don’t celebrate Christmas.”

After that, we got into a discussion where we talked about how material and bullshit holidays had become. She disagreed, insisting that if it weren't for the pressure to find her other half, holidays were awesome. Other than Thanksgiving, we hadn't celebrated any in years.

"Okay, okay, but no Christmas tree? Come on," she said, laughing.

"No," Naga said.

"Well," she said, slapping her thigh. "I'll have to bring mine. It's pink, so get ready." A pause hung between us. "Shit. Sorry. That was presumptuous. Implying I'd be there for the holidays."

Something about that big word coming from her sweet mouth nailed me to the floor. "Why don't you?" Naga asked her.

"Why don't I what?"

Naga looked at me, and I gave a short nod. We'd known one another for so long, words weren't always needed. "We've decided we want you to come here, Jasmine," he said. "We want to get to know you better and for you to get to know us. I think ninety days is the app standard, but whatever you can do would be great."

She nodded, rose red blooming on her cheeks. "I can manage that. My work goes with me. But there's one problem."

"What's that?" I asked.

"I don't do planes."

Chapter Nine

Naga

I trusted planes more than trains but Jasmine insisted airplanes freaked her out. Something about the recycled air and barreling through the air in a glorified coke can with peanut and water bottles not big enough to quench a fairy's thirst.

With a stranger in the house, precautions had to be taken. We rarely had visitors and kept the outside monitored with security cameras and state-of-the-art alarms.

But we had our serpents to protect us, as well as our combined years of military training. Someone would be stupid to try and break in, but Jasmine would be here for ninety days. Three months. We wouldn't have eyes on her twenty-four hours a day.

She could slip into the basement and see all kinds of things she did not have security clearance for. While we were mostly a government contractor, we also had outside clients, some possibly unsavory, but all we did was collect information. What they did with the data was their business.

We had a lot to protect.

And Jasmine, until she proved herself otherwise, had become one of those things.

To my serpent, she was the only thing worthy of protection.

But that animal didn't pay the bills.

"What did you get?" I asked. Drake came in with large paper bags from the electronics store in the city. Normally, we would've ordered online, and it would have been a lot cheaper, but with Jasmine coming in the next day, not even overnight shipping would cut it.

"An electronic key code lock. But I bought an old-fashioned padlock as well. Can't be too careful."

He was right, but I chuckled anyway. From the measures we were taking, you'd think we were dragons defending our hoard.

"Tell me this, Drake, since you like stepping into others' shoes. What's Jasmine going to think about all of this? She comes to our home.

Virtual strangers. Knows not a lot about us and she comes in and sees a padlock on the basement door. See where I'm going with this?"

"She's going to think we have bodies in the basement or something. She'll run screaming."

Drake looked at the bags then back at me. His body began to shake as a wide smile formed on his face. "What was I thinking?"

I joined him in laughter. "No clue, man, but stop it. Keypad, yes. Padlock, definitely not. Unless she comes here and you decide you don't like her, then by all means..."

"Stop it. We like her. And we told her we were in cybersecurity, which, we technically are."

"You're right," I answered. "We do like her. Let's get this done."

The keypad was a breeze to install, and we tested it several times, choosing a code we would both easily remember. We also texted the number to each other, no context included, for safety's sake. Not getting into our office would be a ride we didn't want to take.

I meandered up to the guest bedroom with the new towels and other things Drake had picked up while he was in the city. He had gone to more than the electronics store. A small town lay a few miles from our home, but when we needed more than milk and eggs, we either had it delivered or made a trip to the city. Before today, neither of us had gone in months. Maybe six months.

The guest suite lay at the top of the stairs. There were three bedrooms on the second floor, but Drake and I chose the smaller bedrooms downstairs. We only slept there, anyway. Some would call what we did napping in between long strains of work.

The master suite next to the one we planned for her to use was always meant for our mate but, while we put effort into the end game, we never planned on getting there being so hard.

We worked all the time, giving us little chance to meet someone.

Ordering everything online kept us even more isolated.

Our dating attempts didn't go well and soon fizzled out.

But the room was still here, reminding us that we hadn't found her. Taunting us with our failure.

I would never think less of someone else who didn't have a mate, but not being able to find ours felt like an epic strike against us.

My parents had met in high school and Drake's parents right out of college. Most shifters found their mates early in their twenties if they had to wait that long.

"Everything in its place?" Drake asked.

Damn it. I'd been so deep in thought I hadn't even heard him come up the stairs.

"You're still standing at the door holding that stack of towels. Is something wrong?"

Overthinking everything?

"Just thinking. I'll put these in the bathroom. Can you open the windows? Let's air it out a bit."

Drake nodded. "I can do that."

We had cleaned the room the night before and honestly it felt good to do more physical work. My body stretched and strained standing up so much, which worried me more than anything. I needed to get more physical activity in. Drake even suggested a standing desk for the both of us. Plus, we decided to get a workout in every morning. We managed to get a few in during the week, but now we planned for a more daily routine.

Plus, we wanted to get in better shape for our mate, if Jasmine was the one.

Chapter Ten

Jasmine

They insisted on paying for my train fare, and I wished I had enough money to argue about it. But I didn't, so I thanked them as graciously as I could manage and promised myself I'd pay them back after I won the bet. Because I would. Packing for the trip, I tried to pretend it was no big deal and that after ninety days, I'd be home again, picking up right where I left off, unchanged by the experience.

Why couldn't I believe that?

Seeing Drake and Naga in video chat made all of this entirely too real. I bumped my wheeled bag down the front steps and out to the sidewalk. I ran over our conversation in my mind as I had since it ended, pausing for only too few hours to sleep. They were in cybersecurity, they said, doing a lot of work as contractors for the US government but also for other clients. Considering how much time I spent online, my knowledge of such things didn't extend far beyond not using 123456 for a password. Of course I had antivirus, but I didn't understand a lot about how it worked.

I did get the idea that it was not something they'd be able to discuss with me over the dinner table, but that was okay. They probably wouldn't want to hear how I worked with layers of images and used various parts to put together characters on cover flats.

I got the message that my rideshare was arriving and indeed could see them coming down the street in the early morning light. Leaving my car at the train station parking lot was not only expensive but unnecessary with such inexpensive and reliable alternatives. The guys had suggested I reconsider my refusal to fly and indeed had asked me what happened to make me feel that way, but I had no good answer. My grandfather had always said that if we were meant to fly, we'd have wings, and even though it was not particularly logical—after all, the same thinking process could be applied to going sixty miles an hour and being born with a combustion engine—I hadn't been able to get past it. That little girl who sat on Grandpa's lap, sucking on a candy and listening to his wisdom, still missed the man who'd passed away right when she started kindergarten. And the train was great, always a nice way to travel.

The station was only about fifteen minutes from home, but by the time I got there, I had almost talked myself out of going at all. My dang throat was tickling, and I had to keep sipping from my water bottle to keep from coughing. It was best not to be hacking in a public place, or everyone on the train would fear they'd been exposed to something awful.

"Here." The driver tossed a little bag to me. "Probably the weather; it's been so dry lately. Honey drops really help."

I took one and tried to pass it back, but he waved me off. "I have lots. Hope they help."

He was so kind, the honey drop soothing and reminding me of Grandpa's candies. And once I was aboard the train and sitting in the comfortable seat, I leaned back to watch the landscape and grew much more relaxed.

Having planned to work on a cover design, instead, I gifted myself these hours rolling across the states to slow down and take a break. I so rarely looked away from my screens, and maybe it was time to do that some. I'd worked darn hard to achieve my success and gain a strong following, but if I didn't make some changes, my health would suffer.

At some point, my eyes drifted closed because when I returned to awareness, the train was slowing, and the conductor's announcement came over the speaker system. My stop next. I jolted out of the seat and dashed to the restroom to freshen up because it was not going to do for me to meet these two handsome shifters, looking like something the cat dragged in and with dragon breath from my nap. So, I brushed my teeth with enthusiasm and rinsed with the small bottle of mouthwash I carried in my pack today.

Freeing my hair from its braid, I shook it out and brushed the waves over my shoulders then reapplied some lip gloss and mascara, a little blusher, and called it good. The train stopped with a slight shake, and I braced myself on the sink then returned to get my things from my seat. Descending to the platform, I looked around for the shifters, not seeing them at first. I got that icky unmoored feeling of being in a strange place alone, not actually that different from when Mom was late picking me up from school once when I was six.

But I wasn't six, and even if nobody did show up this time, I had enough money to buy a ticket home. I wasn't that broke!

“Jasmine!” The deep, smooth voice of Naga pulled me from my overthinking. “Over here.”

The crowd parted, and I saw them standing outside the station. I don’t know how I missed them, since they were taller than just about anyone else there. Must have just been the angle, or maybe they had been inside the station? Anyway, no matter. I stood up straighter and pasted on what I hoped looked like a confident smile. I let the crowd pull me in their direction, my heart hammering so loudly I hoped nobody could hear it.

“Here you are.” Drake reached out and pulled me in for a hug. “Welcome.” He gave me a squeeze and passed me to Naga who also gave me a quick, firm embrace.

“Hello, Jasmine. We didn’t see you at first and were afraid you might have changed your mind.”

Their combined strength and masculine scents weakened my knees. “Change my mind? Never.” I laughed, but deep inside, a fear bubbled up. What had I gotten myself into?

Chapter Eleven

Drake

She was everything we'd dreamed of and more. My serpent coiled within me, watching, knowing, insisting we mate her immediately, but we still had a lot to learn about her, and she about us. From the moment she came into our arms, it became difficult, nearly impossible to think logically, but we hadn't survived in war zones by being scatterbrained. Naga and I could handle any situation that arose. After greeting her, we'd picked up her stowed bag and escorted her right to the car.

"Here's the house." Naga pulled into the driveway and activated the garage door. We did not park outside, for security reasons. Most of what we did was for security reasons, except for Jasmine. I still had some concerns about her, but we'd taken precautions to make sure our work was secured, and I really didn't think she was a spy or any kind of operative. I just wanted to know what her deal actually was. "Don't get out until I deactivate the alarm." Once we were inside the house, it would be rearmed. The house itself didn't hold anything super secret. It was all downstairs, but our home was one more layer of protection for our business, so it had a lot of its own electronics going on.

At the beep, I opened the back passenger side door and exited, opening Jasmine's door. "It's fine, now. Come on in and we'll get you situated." I ushered her into the house via the kitchen. "If you want or need to go outside, you'll have to enter a code."

"Is there a lot of crime around here or something?" She looked alarmed, not what we wanted to have happen.

"No, but we picked up our habits of being extra careful in the military," Naga said in a casual tone. "Ready for the tour, or would you rather rest after your long trip?"

"The tour," she said decisively. "Train travel is pretty relaxing, as it goes." She flushed, warm pink rising in her cheeks. "I napped for a lot of the trip."

"That's good." Naga rolled her bag to the foot of the stairs. "Want to leave your backpack here with the suitcase and we'll start downstairs?"

We showed her around the living room and pointed out the powder room under the stairs then the back patio where we demonstrated the code for disarming the French doors. “It’s not meant to keep you in, so go out anytime, but when you come in, please rearm it, okay? It puts our minds at ease.”

“You sure there aren’t a lot of criminals around?”

“Truly, no,” I reassured her. “So the kitchen is this way.” We were proud of that room with all its shiny stainless steel appliances, even if we didn’t cook as much as we should. Especially in the last few years, there were so many delivery services available even here, a bit out of town. Not as many as in the city of course, but enough. And convenience foods. But we did enjoy cooking, and the delivery that came last night was all about preparing fresh and healthy meals for our guest, our possible mate.

“Help yourself to anything you like. We want you to feel at home,” Naga said. “Let’s go into the family room area here. We mostly use it for media stuff, watching movies or listening to music. Relaxing.”

“It’s actually where we are nearly all the time when we aren’t working,” I put in. Big comfortable leather sofas and the biggest TV we could find made it a great place to screen the latest releases one of our clients hooked us up with. It wasn’t illegal since they were charged with handing out copies to selective people, and our job was making sure those movies didn’t go where they weren’t supposed to.

Much more cutthroat than we’d ever dreamed when we took on that contract.

“Upstairs next,” Naga suggested, and we left the kitchen, family room area, passing the basement door. It was the third time we’d passed it, but the first time, Jasmine came to a halt.

“What’s behind there? Is that a keypad?”

“Our office in the basement,” I told her. “Nothing interesting down there, but in our line of work, we are responsible to keep data private, so yes, it’s locked.”

“Uh, okay.”

“Upstairs!” I ushered her away from the door. “I hope you’ll like the room we have for you.”

She allowed us to take her up, along with her luggage, and show her around the room. We did not take her into the other bedrooms, nor had we

shown her our bedrooms downstairs, something she noticed. After admiring the attached bath, she asked, "So the other bedrooms are yours?"

"We sleep downstairs," Naga said. "But we're not far away if you need us."

We left her to take a shower and change after her travel, heading downstairs to prepare dinner. I got salad ingredients out while Naga heated the spaghetti sauce he made the day before. While chopping lettuce, I commented, "I think that went okay. My serpent is very excited."

"Mine, too, but there's something there."

I piled the lettuce in the bowl and turned my attention to a tomato. "She's hiding something, and we can't let our guard down until we know what it is."

We talked while we got everything ready and agreed that while we were both very attracted to her, and something about her presence calmed our serpents, we had to keep our heads about us and not reveal too much too soon.

Patience was a skill we had. We needed to use it.

Chapter Twelve

Jasmine

It took me all of three seconds to remember where I was. Smells were a shifter thing, but I knew their scents already. I drifted to sleep engulfed in them. Naga was a minty chocolate, while Drake was all brown sugar and cinnamon.

Everything in this house smelled like them. The sheets. The towels. It clung to the walls and was now inside my nose.

Not that I was complaining.

Gods. I hadn't expected this kind of home. I thought their home would be contemporary with all metal furniture and nowhere comfy to sit or relax. I imagined lots of glass and stainless steel. All cold things. I might've judged them a bit harshly based on their serpents.

I was in their den now. Now to make sure I didn't fall for either one of them, or both.

The million-thread-count sheets along with the plush comforter wasn't helping my case. If I won this bet and my debts were paid off, these exact sheets and comforter would be first on my list to purchase.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I looked out, seeing the view of the land. There were mountains in the distance. They would probably cap with snow once the winter set in.

I wouldn't be here to see it.

Somehow that saddened me.

Seeing the sun rise on the horizon, I decided to get up and make some breakfast. I was starving, and it was the least I could do to repay them for the train tickets and letting me sleep in the most luxurious bed in the world.

More time than I'd wanted was spent on dressing. They didn't tell me of any plans for the day, so I decided on some stretchy jeans and a loose T-shirt without any clever sayings on it at all. I wasn't trying to impress them. The bet was about me not falling in love, but Drake and Naga already seemed like good people. I might be doing all of this for money, but they didn't deserve to have their hearts broken in the process.

Their kitchen was clean and tidy. The dishwasher had a magnet that indicated whether the dishes inside were clean or dirty. The counters weren't sparse, but it was clear that everything had its place.

The fridge was fully stocked. I wondered if they did that because of the company, aka me, coming in, or if they cooked a lot.

There was so much I wanted to know about them. They intrigued me. Especially the idea of them sharing a mate. Sure, there were some humans who shared partners, but they were few and far between.

Besides, shifters in romance were jealous as fuck. Always growling and making possessive moves.

I took out the eggs, staring at them for a good minute. *Wait a second.* Did serpent shifters lay eggs? That was how snakes were born, right?

"What did those eggs ever do to you?" Naga's voice broke me from my staring. I shook my head and looked up only to find myself entranced by two someones far more delicious than any breakfast I could ever cook.

"I, um, I all of a sudden don't want eggs." I put them back in the refrigerator.

"Why do I have the feeling this has something to do with us?" Drake clapped Naga on the back.

The eggs and breakfast and all coherent thought vanished from my head.

They were both dripping with sweat. Head to toe. No shirts. Their tattoos covered every inch of skin but stopped in a perfect circle around their necks and just shy of their wrists.

So they could wear a suit or their uniforms without them being seen?

"I wasn't thinking about snakes having eggs. Oh my gods." I bent over at the waist and not so gently laid my forehead on the counter in front of me. "Can we pretend I didn't say that?"

"We absolutely cannot. And will not," Drake said. They approached the island, but I didn't have the courage to look up. Five damned seconds in front of these males, and I was a blubbering, embarrassing mess. A hand landed on my back. "Come on, sweetheart," he said, his breath warm on my neck. "Look up."

I straightened, my face on fire.

"Much better, Jasmine." Naga took the eggs back out. "I like them. And let's answer your question since it seems like you're curious. Serpent shifter babies are born in a transparent egg-like casing. No hard exterior or

cracking open—nothing like that. My father said that when I was born, his serpent pushed his fangs from his human gums and ripped the egg open, immediately retracting them once I was released. Sounds kind of gross, but my mother called it beautiful.”

“Like an embryonic sack?” I said, finally able to breathe again.

“That’s pretty close,” Drake said. He pulled out bagels and cream cheese while Naga got started on omelets.

Instead of making them breakfast, I stood there like an oaf enjoying the show.

“Can you tell me about your tattoos?” I asked. Their backs were valleys and peaks of muscle.

How they did that with a desk job was beyond me.

Naga nodded, and Drake spoke. “We were in the same unit. Were deployed twice. Almost a third time, but our contract was up. We’ve seen a lot of things together. We have some that are the same.” He pointed out the ones that indicated their unit with numbers and names. The places they’d been deployed to. Slogans of the marines. But the most impressive ones were a huge snake that wrapped around Naga’s left bicep and when Drake sidled up to his best friend, the snakes lined up with each other. Naga’s left arm to Drake’s right.

Seeing that made me somehow feel outcast, like I was intruding on what was a lifetime friendship.

“That’s amazing,” I murmured. “You two have been through a lot together.”

“We have but we have a lot of life left. Now,” Naga said, sliding a plate toward me. “Let’s eat while we learn more about you, Jasmine.”

Chapter Thirteen

Jasmine

“I started as everyone in the publishing business starts. My father taught me to read before I hit kindergarten. Daniel Boone books of all things. My mom complained he was teaching me to be a tomboy but...” I shrugged.

“You clearly turned into a lovely woman. Unless you have a coonskin cap somewhere in your bags?” Drake laughed as we moved to sit in the living room. There were blankets thrown over the backs of the couches. As I sat down on the couch, I found it to feel exactly as it looked, cozy, and my body sank into the cushions just the right amount.

I put my hands on my hips. “Are you trying to say I wouldn’t be beautiful with a furry hat on? Don’t answer that. I’m grossed out by the skinned-animal thing anyway. So, I read most of my life and, when I got my graphic design degree, I didn’t want to work on logos and menus anymore. I took a month and created about thirty covers to see if I could make a splash.”

“And clearly you did. We looked at your site a bit before you gave it to us. Not in depth but in our business, we have to be careful who we associate with. Especially someone who might be living in our home or getting close to us.”

Getting close to them? Yeah, I wanted that. To have them hold me in their arms. Those strong arms that despite their shifter species guaranteed me a warm place to feel safe.

No!

Gods. This couldn’t happen.

Remember the bet, Jasmine. Get in. Stay. Get out, unattached.

One day, and that bet was proving hard to focus on.

“Is that why the keypad on the basement door? You’re afraid little ol’ me will get your secrets, or do you have bodies or sex slaves down there?”

Naga’s hand flew out and popped Drake right on the back of the head. I nearly spilled my cup of coffee and, honestly, I didn’t know which event would be more tragic. I was a coffee girl through and through.

Drake's face fell. He cleared his throat. "Who told you...about the sex slaves? Is that why you got on the app."

My chest twisted, and my stomach knotted up. "What? I don't..."

They both cracked up, throwing their heads back. They were kidding. Again.

I guessed I should be grateful for the sense of humor, but sweat gathered at the back of my neck and along the crown of my head. "You two," I said, taking a few long, deep breaths.

"Sorry. I couldn't help myself. The keypad isn't just for keeping people out. It's also for keeping some things in. In our line of business, sometimes, secrets pass over the screens. Secrets that would be detrimental to the owner if they were to get out. Secrets that could put a target on the onlooker. We're trying to keep you safe and our work safe."

Safe. We all used that word a lot.

Me, in my head.

"We saw you design covers for some prominent publishing houses."

They always brought the conversation back to me. "I started working for indies who maybe couldn't afford the more prominent cover designers but needed quality."

"And then?" Naga prodded gently.

"Then it kind of exploded. I still love making covers for everyone though. I have so many books at home, all the covers designed by me and signed by the author. I don't even have the room for them. Most are still in their boxes."

"Why not live somewhere other than your small apartment?"

I scoffed. "Because my degree came with a hefty price tag, and my parents didn't believe in college funds. So, while I make a lot of money, I also pay a lot out, plus, self-employed and royalties sucks at tax time. And what's the point in buying a house when you don't really leave your desk a lot?"

"Gets lonely, huh?" Drake smiled, deep dimples in his chin tempting me to touch them. Kiss the skin around the indents.

"It does. But you two have a cute town down there. Don't tell me you two don't go there."

Naga rubbed his hand over his head. "We don't get there as much as we'd like to. But tonight, we will."

"We are?" Or did he just mean them?

“We thought we would take you out to dinner.”

“What should I wear?”

“Nothing formal in these parts. What you have on is fine.”

“What do we do until then?” I asked, not trying to sound so damned sultry. These two were turning me into a needy fool.

“We have some work to do, and we thought maybe you did as well?”

“I do.” Not that I wanted to right then. But I also didn’t want to keep them from theirs. “I’ll set up on the island if that’s okay?”

They both nodded. “We thought we would work up here today as well, but no peeking.” Naga winked at me.

What would it feel like if they actually touched me? I’d probably catch on fire.

I was wrong about these two, and that fact scared me. I needed them to be cold and icy but instead, they were warmer than my heated blanket in the winter.

“Pinky promise. I’ll, um, I’ll go get my laptop.”

I ran upstairs and felt my heart beating fast. Sure, I could blame it on the sprinting upstairs, but I knew the real reason.

Naga and Drake were already burrowing under my skin in a good way. I’d never felt so thrilled and excited and yet terrified in my entire life.

I was here to win a bet, but the odds were already not in my favor.

Chapter Fourteen

Naga

The diner along the highway was anything but fancy and entirely authentic. It had been open for nearly a century, and the same family of rabbit shifters still owned and operated it. Jasmine walked in and looked around then gave a little bounce. “Wow. I see why you said I could come as I am. Very casual but perfect.” She ran a hand over one maroon leather stool at the counter. “Do they make malted milks?”

“Like milkshakes?” I asked. “I think so.”

“Malts are different,” she insisted. “And almost nobody makes them.”

“We do.” The current owner of the diner, a grandmotherly bunny, bustled out from the kitchen. “And we like those who understand those differences.”

We were almost immediately seated in a booth by the window, where only the most favored customers got to sit, and Jasmine had won over another person. Grandma Bunny—her name was actually Bunny, go figure—discussed the difference between shakes and malts with Jasmine and helped her decide what flavor she’d like. From what I could gather, the only real difference was the addition of malted milk powder. But Jasmine and Grandma Bunny spoke of toastiness and richness and I didn’t even remember what all attributes this treat had, but when the chocolate malt arrived, we were instructed to have a taste, and then both women watched us for our reaction.

We fell short. I thought it tasted kind of funny and Drake didn’t like even shakes particularly. Fortunately, before it could become a problem, the onion rings arrived, and we all agreed on those. Dinner became really fun then in a way I didn’t remember it being in a long time, if ever. Jasmine told us about a few of her covers and the stories behind them. Stories about human women and the shifter who loved them, and about that time, the laughter died down and the atmosphere heated up.

The burgers were delicious, but we ate them quickly, watching one another more than the food. Jasmine laughed a little too much at our poor attempts at humor, and my cock was hard the entire time. If we didn’t get

out of here soon, I'd shame myself by flipping our mate onto the table and taking her right here.

No...I wouldn't, but the idea made me even harder, and the flush that rose up Jasmine's chest to her cheeks had me nearly choking on the last bite of my burger.

When we got in the car, I turned to Jasmine. "We will never do anything you don't want, but we need to know, will you—"

"Please take me home and make love to me."

She didn't have to ask us twice.

We spilled out of the car and ran together up the stairs, almost forgetting to punch in the code and arm the security system. Jasmine had to remind us. But she didn't have to give us any hints about how to undress her before taking off our own clothes and lying on the bed in her room with her between us.

We had dreamed of the day we'd have a mate together, but in none of my fantasies was she as exquisite as Jasmine. I had to keep reminding myself that we were in early days here. Jasmine was not a shifter but a human, and they were known to need a courting or dating period. We had ninety days to see if we were compatible. But my serpent knew we were meant to be. Fated. True mates.

Even among shifters, mates had a choice. But who would turn down the perfect person for them? A human, maybe?

We would not mark her tonight, but she had consented to making love, and it was up to us to show her that a mate's lovemaking was better than anything else in the world. Kisses and caresses led to more intimate touching, her scent floral and lovely, winding around us along with ours until I met Drake's eyes over her and let him know without words that he could be first. With a mate, it was always like the first time, so I felt no jealousy toward my friend and partner. He cupped her bottom and lifted her to his lips, licking then suckling on her pussy until she cried out her pleasure before standing up and driving into her. I kissed her lips and breasts, pinching her nipples into points and then biting them gently, loving her writhing under our ministrations. Drake moved faster and faster, reaching to cup her bottom and plunge deeper into her body. Just touching her was ecstasy, but when Drake stood up and moved away, I took my place and felt like coming home. I had waited so long, hoping Fate had a mate for me, for us, always aware that not everyone was so lucky. I

moved in and out of the body of the perfect mate, gratitude joined the sheer pleasure.

Jasmine called out my name, and I lost control, spilling into our mate's body as she tightened around me in orgasm.

I wanted to mark her so badly, but our time would come. I had to believe that.

Chapter Fifteen

Jasmine

I woke up late, and alone.

Who could blame me for the late part because a pair of serpent shifters had kept me up most of the night. And it was incredible sex, but it was more than that. I lay in my bed, the covers rumpled and half on the floor, the scents of both males and sex intoxicating and a little overwhelming. I hadn't been opposed to the idea of having sex with them, but it came on so fast and intense. But then, what had I expected? Two men. I'd somehow not let that be a big factor in coming here. I had planned to enjoy myself, and hopefully they would too, but hearts could not be harmed. I had never been with two men at the same time before, and in all logic, I should have been concerned over what that would mean. What it would be like. But when we tumbled into bed, this bed, and I saw those two men, so much bigger than me in every meaningful way, fear threatened to overtake attraction and general horniness.

And the only thing that kept me from running away was the something more I didn't want to look at. Of course, once they started kissing and touching and everything, my desire rose above any anxiety. They were not only really good in bed, but tender and caring and all those factors combined to make for an extraordinary night. I'd never felt as loved as I did last night. Could it ever be like that again?

Or was it just a first-time thing?

I wasn't a virgin, just new to multiple people in a bed. Why hadn't that been a dealbreaker for me or at least concerning? I stretched, feeling pleasantly sore in places I hadn't felt that way about in a while. It was nice, and I considered just going back to sleep. Another hour or two...I rarely slept more than five or six hours anyway, and it would be awful to catch up on shut-eye while I was here. The bed was every bit as comfortable as I'd thought it would be... And the men were serpentine, so far as I could tell, in only one way. They were incredibly flexible.

Then laughing voices carried from downstairs, and the urge to sleep fled. Images of their faces filled my mind and I hopped up to shower, ready to start the day. I dressed simply in shorts and one of my book-

themed tees, this one extolling the virtues of romance reading for good health. My hair was damp from the shower, but I didn't take the time to do anything about that beyond running a comb through it. The urge to be close to these two men mingled with the scent of bacon frying that had my tummy rumbling.

When I got downstairs, I passed the basement door on the way to the kitchen and paused to look at the keypad. It wasn't the same as the ones by the patio and front doors, and I wondered if they used the same code? When they brought their work in the day before, they carefully kept their screens facing away from me, and I felt a little insulted by their lack of trust. Why didn't they want me to see what they were doing?

My hand was lifted to try the code when Drake's voice sounded closer, and I quickly dropped it to my side. I took quick steps toward the kitchen and entered, smiling. Drake was actually still in the kitchen, but he was at the end closer to the hallway, so that was why he'd sounded nearer. He was. "Morning," I greeted them. "Smells great in here."

Drake looped an arm around me and gave me a squeeze. "It does now." He nuzzled my neck. "Mmm."

I tried to wriggle free then relaxed into his hold. "I meant the bacon."

"And I meant you." He dropped a kiss on my lips then let me go. "How did you sleep?"

"Excellent question. I don't know that I did, really. Some guys kept waking me up to poke me."

"Poke you?" Naga chuckled. "I like that image. Come over here and we can talk more about it." He wore only lounge pants, as did Drake, and it didn't take a genius to see their reaction to me through the thin cotton.

"Mmm. That sounds great, but the bacon would burn."

"I think she's obsessed with the bacon," Naga said.

Drake grinned, reaching for me again. "Not with us, pretty girl?"

I rolled my eyes. "I imagine women line up down the block to get in here and get poked."

Naga puffed out his bottom lip. "Now poking doesn't sound as interesting. Random women? No. You"—he left the pan of sputtering bacon to come over and capture me against him—"I'll poke you anytime."

"I read a lot of romance novels," I said, as Drake came behind me, caging me between them. "And I don't recall a lot of talking about poking."

“No?” he asked. “Then what do they call this?” His lips came down on the back of my neck, warm and firm. “Someday, we’ll take you together, at the same time. Would you like that?”

The smoke alarm saved me from answering, but the goose bumps on my arms and legs told the tale.

Fortunately, most of the bacon did not burn, and we sat down at the table to eat breakfast together. In my past relationships, or what passed as relationships, breakfast the morning after rarely happened, and I found this to be most enjoyable. Now that they were off the topic of erotic poking, they suggested we go to the local town and “poke” around.

Men. Shifters or not, they were all about the double entendres.

But in this case, it was more than that. Because as soon as we finished eating, they closed in on me again with kisses and hugs and snuggles that weakened my knees and came way too close to melting my heart.

Chapter Sixteen

Drake

She is our mate.

Or as my serpent said: *Mate.*

He was saying it repeatedly and with emphasis, more often now and demanding that we close the deal. We'd had one night of lovemaking, and it was not nearly enough. Even over breakfast, we were teasing about doing it again, but once the dishes were empty, we did not take the time to wash them or even clear them away before reaching for her again.

Her scent had changed already, becoming closer to ours, spicier and less floral in nature. Could it be that mating was taking place without our even marking her? Serpent shifters were rare, and we didn't know many others beyond our immediate families who had been conservative in the extreme when talking about things of an intimate nature. We did know about how young were born and so were able to explain that, but most of our information on the mating aspect, unfortunately, had come from other species who didn't necessarily match how things worked for us 100 percent.

For example, the fact that we shifted immediately after birth, and not just once like some others. Baby serpents kept that ability all through their growing up and into adulthood. It made things interesting in a world where not all humans knew of or chose to acknowledge that there were other kind of people passing through their daily lives.

Plus, even if we did know how things of this nature, the bonding, the mating, worked for others like us, what did injecting a human into the mix do?

Breathing in her warm scent, stroking the soft skin of her arms, a small part of me tried to remind the rest that we probably shouldn't make love again until we were sure what we were doing here. Found out her secret because she was holding something back. But the small part of me lost out to the rest when Naga nipped her throat and a soft moan came from her lips.

She weighed nothing, although her curves insisted it should be more, and I scooped her up in my arms and kissed her thoroughly, taking my

time and enjoying her taste and scent, tongue stroking hers until Naga tapped me on the arm.

“Your room or mine?” he asked.

“Not hers?”

“You want to take that long?”

No. I did not. Without another word, I carried her into the family room and sat down on the couch with Jasmine standing between my knees. I smoothed my hands up her sides, taking her shirt with me and exposing her beautiful, full breasts. Braless. How she always should be, not that I’d boss her that way. However she was comfortable was the best for us. Her shirt landed on the floor as Naga eased her shorts over her hips and down her legs, leaving her in cherry-patterned boy-cut underwear. But I didn’t have long to appreciate them before they tore away at the sides. Hopefully, she didn’t love them, but we’d buy her a dozen more, with pleasure. But her soft smile and half-closed eyes showed not a bit of anger at my friend’s eagerness.

I lifted my hips and pulled off my own pants before easing our mate onto my lap. Even if the marking wasn’t done, I had admitted the fact to myself. I settled her over my cock and bent to take one of her nipples into my mouth, plunging deep into her hot wetness, her body closing around me as if meant for me. For us. Naga sat next to us and watched, his eyes hot, hand stroking his own length while he waited his turn. She would take us together, but not until the time was right.

Jasmine’s breathing grew faster, and I grasped her hips, raising and lowering her while watching her climb toward her orgasm, holding back until the ripples of her climax milked me dry and held her close against me, kissing her lips again, their sweetness dissolving the walls I tried to keep up.

Naga took her then and bent her over the arm of the sofa, entering her from behind, bringing her twice more before he spent and hung over her, panting. Then he lifted her gently and set her beside me, sat down on her other side, and we rested for a while, quietly, in a mind space I’d never been before. How could we have bonded this way without the marking?

If things didn’t work out, if she did have a dealbreaker of a secret, we could still go back, right? We had held out enough to leave an escape hatch. But if she was going to be here for ninety days, it was going to be

very difficult to guard our hearts from this winsome female who seemed so perfect for us.

Jasmine's eyes closed, her head on my shoulder, and Naga rested next to her, breathing soft. The two of them drifted off while I stayed awake, the thoughts running through my head keeping me from a nap. We had to gain her trust before we could trust her entirely. Maybe I'd been wrong in thinking that it was up to her to open herself to us first.

But we couldn't exactly show her our client files, government or otherwise. She'd need a bigger background check than we'd done at minimum and a security clearance for a lot of it. If she was committed to staying forever, if we knew what she was hiding...I'd get started on all that immediately. But there had to be a way to get her to share her secrets so we knew what we were dealing with.

I just had no idea what they were.

Chapter Seventeen

Jasmine

After wearing one another out yet again, we napped on the soft leather sofa in the family room for two hours and a bit. When we woke, the guys still wanted to take me to town, and since there were parts of me crossing a bit past pleasantly sore and into take-a-break territory, I was all for the trip.

The station wasn't in their closest town, and of course the diner was on the highway, which was the route we took from the train, so I hadn't gotten a look at the place yet and was excited to see what it was like. Everyone needed another shower first, though, and I was glad they didn't suggest I take one with them. Not that I didn't think it would be fun and stimulating, but my body would not thank me.

We took a two-lane road winding through open country, and I settled back in the passenger seat to enjoy the views. "How long have you lived here?"

"Since we got out of the military. We were looking for somewhere quiet both for our work and just general peace. We'd had enough of the opposite in the Middle East and other places we still aren't allowed to talk about." Drake was driving, one hand on my knee and very distracting. In a good way.

"Wow. I can't imagine what you must have experienced. But thank you for your service."

Naga chuckled dryly. "Everyone says that, but not many know what they are thanking us, or any service person, for. We went through a lot, but most of those in our unit came back, so there's that."

"Most...but not all."

"No. Not all. We lost some good friends." Drake's voice was low, subdued. "But you don't want to hear about the sad things."

"Any time you want to share, I want to hear." Not that I believed now was that time. I hadn't earned that level of connection and if I was going to leave, it would be unfair to pretend I had. I let a few minutes of silence pass before asking, "How far is this town anyway?"

“Just up ahead. You can’t see it for the trees, plus the slight uphill here,” Naga said. “Give it a minute.”

“Okay.” I leaned forward though, as far as my seat belt would allow, more enthusiastic than I’d have expected, to see a small town in the middle of almost nowhere. To be fair, there were other towns showing on the map I’d looked at, and a respectable version of a city not too terribly far away, but the one we were headed to had just been a blip on the radar.

Finally, the woods on either side of the road ended as we reached the top of the slope. Before us lay a charming collection of buildings, more like my definition of a village than a town, but that didn’t matter in the least. “It’s so cute!”

“Cute enough that most residents have to order things they need online or go elsewhere to purchase them,” Drake said. “Still, it is ‘cute.’”

I cast him a questioning glance, but he didn’t seem to notice, just drove onto the main street and found a parking place in front of a toy store. I hadn’t even known toy stores still existed outside of the internet. “Can we go in there and look around?”

“Whatever you like.” Naga hopped out of the back seat and opened my door before I could do it for myself. They were such gentlemen in many ways, and I could easily get used to it. “After you, Jasmine.”

The store was amazing in every way. As soon as I walked in, a short, round man with large eyes and pointed ears stepped from between curtains at the back of the store to greet us. “Welcome! We don’t get many tourists here.”

I took the hand he extended and shook it. “Thank you so much. But I’m not a tourist, just here visiting with Naga and Drake. What a charming store you have here.”

He released my hand and shook each of the guys’, introducing himself as he did. “I’m William, and this is my shop. Everything you see here was either carved or created by me or one of my local friends. Please enjoy yourselves and let me know if you have any questions.” He disappeared into the back again, leaving me puzzled. It was such a small town, and he didn’t know the serpents? But then, they were single guys who hadn’t mentioned any kids in their families. They probably had no reason to visit a toy store.

After exploring all the beautiful handmade items, I selected a wooden sailboat and a set of brightly colored blocks. William came out front again

to ring me up and took down shipping information for my brother's address. "My nephews will love these," I enthused. "The shipping makes it perfect."

"It's no trouble. Nearly all of our sales are online, so we're all set up for that, the missus and I. We are the only brownies in the area. I see your mates are serpents, but what are you?"

He for sure did not know them, but he thought we were mated already? Well, nobody was perfect. "Ordinary garden-variety human, I'm afraid."

"I guess it's the connection with your mates that scents you as more. But sometimes mating with a shifter can have unexpected affects." He finished the sale and didn't comment on the fact I'd said I was visiting and he called us mates...or the fact that he hadn't realized the guys lived locally. It was all too confusing for me.

We wandered from store to store, and I soon learned that Drake and Naga were virtual strangers here. The only person who seemed to know them at all was at the small general store, and she didn't address them by name. How could they live here all this time and not get to know anybody? Heck, I already was on a first-name basis with most of the shopkeepers and, after our visit, so were they. We had lunch at the sweetest little cafe, and I bought a whole pie to take home with us after trying a slice of their wild blueberry for dessert. The chef/owner, Marty, a shifter of some kind I couldn't identify and didn't want to ask, gave me a hug when I told him it was the flakiest crust I'd ever eaten.

Finally, in the car on the way home, I asked the question that had been burning in my mind all day. "How do you manage to live here and be a total stranger?" Alarm bells were going off in my head.

And Drake's answer, "Oh, we work a lot and order almost everything online" didn't really ring true. Or maybe it wasn't enough. Did they truly try to avoid people for some reason?

Chapter Eighteen

Jasmine

After another cozy evening at home followed by a night in their arms. They were so gentle, recognizing my need to recover from our previous sessions and focusing on my pleasure, bringing me to orgasm with their hands and mouths then gathering me close and talking softly until I drifted off.

In the morning, I woke up to find them gone again and got ready for the day, whatever it might hold. They had mentioned needing to work on something, so I decided I would do the same. But when I got downstairs, I found them at the table with coffee and muffins in front of them.

“Good morning.” Drake stood and kissed me then pulled out my chair. “We have some errands to run, but we wanted to have a little time with you first. How are you this morning?”

“Fabulous.” I accepted the cup of coffee Naga fetched for me. They’d already noticed the way I liked it, one more considerate thing that knocked bricks from the walls I tried to keep up. Most men did not realize how the small things mattered. Always having an extra roll of toilet paper in the bathroom for example. “So, where are you going?” I blurted it out before realizing it might not be any of my business. But we’d already established that they didn’t spend any time in the local town. I found it utterly charming and had already sussed out what things a person might need could be found there. A farmer’s market even on Saturday mornings, I had been told by one of my new friends in the shops. Their prices in the boutique, the florist, the bakery...probably a bit higher than the huge online shopping platforms, but wasn’t it worth it to support my fellow locals?

Theirs, not mine. I was only here for ninety days.

Keep telling yourself that.

“Just some work stuff,” Naga said, finishing his muffin and standing up. “Ready, Drake?”

“We should clean up first,” he protested, but I waved them off.

“I’m still drinking coffee and finishing up my muffin. I’ll handle it.”

They both kissed me and started for the door. “You’ll be all right on your own?”

I swallowed my bite of muffin and nodded. “I have a project I’d like to finish, so I’ll do that while you’re out.”

“Perfect.” Drake came back and dropped a kiss on the top of my head. “Then we’ll all be free to do something fun this afternoon. Maybe a hike?”

“Great.” I watched them go to the kitchen door and disarm it then go outside. “Do I need to reset the alarm?”

“No,” Naga called from the garage. “We can do it remotely.”

I really did intend to finish the cover coming due in a few days, but it was such a nice morning, I took a second cup of coffee out to the patio to enjoy nature. The yard backed up on open woodlands, and birds, butterflies, and small animas provided me with entertainment until out of nowhere, dark clouds rolled in to hide the blue sky and a cold wind kicked up. I picked up my coffee cup and hurried inside, pausing to rearm the alarm just as I’d been shown.

Congratulating myself on my responsibility, I set up my laptop at the breakfast counter and settled in to finish the cover. It was almost done and one of my favorites so far. The author and publisher had already approved the concept and mockup, and now was all about adding the fancy stuff I enjoyed most. Layers and layers to create my modest artwork. Outside, the wind howled, and rain began, battering the windows. A crack of lightning, followed by the rumble of nearby thunder had me hoping that wherever the guys were, they would stay put until this storm passed. As quickly as it came on, it would likely move on through soon. At least I hoped so.

Especially when the next crack of lightning was followed by dimness in the kitchen. The electronic *water* on the refrigerator door blinked out, and I was very glad I hadn’t been working plugged in because the pop when it all went off indicated a possible power surge. Not that I was an expert, but my last laptop died that way despite the surge suppressor it was plugged into.

I hopped off my stool and set out to find a flashlight. Even though it was the middle of the day, the clouds made it almost as dark as night. I felt my way around the kitchen under the assumption that most people kept a flashlight there somewhere, as did I at home. And, in the third drawer I opened, I learned that these serpent shifters also did. I tested it and, of

course, it shone brightly, so I turned it off and went into the family room to wait out the storm.

Rain turned to hail, bouncing off the green metal roof of the wooden structure and the ground outside the large windows. But then, just as suddenly as it arrived, it all stopped, quiet louder than the racket, and the wind blew the clouds on to another place, bringing daylight back, but not the electricity.

I considered sitting outside to work where it was brighter, but the chairs on the patio were soaked through and had small piles of hail on them, so I went back inside, rearmed the alarm, again, and decided to take a nap.

But then, in the hallway outside the kitchen, I passed the door to the basement. Its keypad was dark, like all the other electronics. What did that mean? Nothing. It meant absolutely nothing to me because I didn't have any business with their workspace, which they had been clear was 100 percent private.

How would it look if I tried to break in the very first time they left me alone in the house? Bad. It would look bad. But...if the lock wasn't working, not that I knew that of course, but if it wasn't, how was it breaking in? I could just take a peek, not at their screens or any paper files. Just see what was down there. They'd never know a thing, and I would feel better.

The story of *Bluebeard* had always intrigued me. Also, *Pandora's Box*. Both of those had involved curiosity ending in disaster. But wouldn't I rather know if they had their last mate dead down there? Or some sort of nightmare like Pandora found? Serpent shifters were mysterious in the extreme.

I would just test the door, and if it opened, step inside long enough to see what was what, and then leave again, no harm done. My heart was pounding as I closed my hand around the knob, my throat tickling from nerves. But there was no turning back now, and the knob turned. Just as planned, I opened it and took a step, then another, the door closing behind me. But, of course, it was pitch dark down there below ground level, and there was no power whatsoever. I was turning back to go get the flashlight when the door clicked, the panel next to it on this side came to life, and the door locked. I didn't even need to check it to see—although, of course I did.

I was trapped. And, from below me, I heard the sounds of electronics kicking on. Slowly turning, I surveyed a scene out of a movie. Every kind of gadget, multiple screens flared to life, and voices were asking me questions seemingly out of thin air.

But any danger here was irrelevant. The shifters were going to kill me when they found me in here anyway. Why did I do it?

I set to work trying to find a way out, guessing former military with security as their specialty would have another exit. I was going to have to find it and fast because the number of flashing red lights in here told me that some sort of alarm had been triggered, and soon I'd be facing two very tall, very strong, very angry serpent shifters. Who were, from all the screens flashing different languages, odd gizmos, and clocks with times set to all over the world, among other things, most likely spies.

I broke into a coughing fit with no honey drops in sight.

Chapter Nineteen

Drake

“Do you think Jasmine suspects what we’re up to?” Naga asked, a broad smile creasing his face. My friend had not looked this happy and relaxed in all the years I’d known him. “I really want to surprise her.”

I found parking right in front of our destination. “Not at all. In fact, she looked pretty upset when we wouldn’t tell her where we were going.”

“Oh no.” His smile disappeared. “I didn’t want that.”

“Just think about how happy she’s going to be when she sees what we’ve been up to.” I held the door of the florist/candy store open and followed Naga inside. “Has she said what kind of flowers she likes?”

“Not that I heard, so we’ll have to get the florist, what was his name?”

“Peter.”

“Right, we’ll ask Peter to make something special for us.” The front of the shop, the flower section was run by Peter, the candy store in the back by his wife who made everything right there in front of the customers. Like most of the places in town, they also had a thriving online business, but those who ordered on their website missed out on the incredible scents of both the flowers and the chocolate.

“Did I hear my name?” Peter, a deer shifter, appeared from the back, a heap of assorted blossoms in his arms. “Oh, Naga and Drake, right? Jasmine said you guys have lived here for three years. Funny how we never met before.”

“Yeah.” Memories of how our mate had greeted and gotten to know everyone so quickly then mentioned supporting local businesses rose in my mind. “But we plan to change that. In fact, we’re here to buy some gifts for our girl.”

“See? I knew she was your mate. Mildred, come up here and help me put together presents for Jasmine. Didn’t she say she likes the flower she’s named after?”

I never even thought of the fact she was named after a flower. I just thought her name was pretty, and so was she...what a dolt.

“Yes, and she pointed out a few others. Here, let me grab them and then you can make an arrangement.” She laid out her selections on the

counter and faced us. “Did you also want candy?”

“I don’t suppose you know what she prefers?” Naga asked dryly. We’d been right here—how had we not heard all the things she said? Were we so hung up on shame for our own neglect to meet our neighbors we just didn’t listen?

“I do in fact. Two pounds enough?” Mildred didn’t wait for our answer, just headed for the back, humming under her breath.

“We need to become better listeners if we’re going to have a mate,” Naga muttered.

“My thought exactly.”

After we paid, we waited for the deer couple to package our presents for our mate. A storm raged outside, but they were quick to come and go in this area, and Jasmine was safe at home. The shopkeepers were taking a long time, and finally my phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out just as Naga did the same.

He went pale. “We have to go.”

“Now?” Peter was tying a ribbon around the bouquet.

“Yes, it’s an emergency.”

“Wait. Mildred? Are you about done?”

She bustled in with a box big enough to hold five pounds rather than the two we paid for. “Here you go. Anything wrong?”

“We’re needed at home. Thank you for everything.” I grabbed the flowers, Naga the candy, and we raced out the door to find the streets wet and covered with leaves. Hail caught the returning sunlight, sparkling like diamonds in the planters lining the sidewalk. “Whoa, it got bad, didn’t it?”

“Yes, and I’m thinking that might have been the issue with the alarm,” he said, jumping into the car as I ran around to the driver’s side and we deposited the flowers and candy in the back seat. “It happened before.”

“The generator should have kicked in. Do you think Jasmine is scared?”

“I’ll call her.” Naga still held his phone somehow and hit speed dial. The dash picked it up and we both listened to the phone ring and ring and finally go to voice mail. Not good. While I didn’t think anyone who had anything against us or our clients knew where we were, there was always a chance, which was why we had everything so locked up. “She’s not answering.”

Hell. I knew that, could hear it as well as he could...but it didn't make me any less anxious. The short drive home, taken at a speed well above the illegal limit, seemed to take forever, and we pulled into the driveway to see the generator on the side looking perfectly fine from this distance. But we didn't have time to check it out, instead parking and running for the front door. Our policy of never parking in the driveway went out the window in an emergency.

I wasn't sure what to expect when I used the app on my phone to unlock the door, but it worked perfectly. "Power is back on." I ran inside. "Jasmine? Are you here?" Racing from room to room, upstairs and down, we searched for her, but then my steps faltered in the hallway outside the kitchen. The keypad blinked red. "Naga. I think...I can't be right but..."

He skidded to a halt at my side. "But either it was just the new security blown by the storm, or someone has been in our office."

"Jasmine?"

"How could she? Why would she?"

"Maybe she doesn't trust us any more than we trust her." I twisted the doorknob, which opened easily. "It's not locked," I said unnecessarily.

"Be careful. You don't know it's her down there," Naga pointed out, but neither of us was ever unarmed.

Withdrawing my concealed carry weapon from its calf holster, I waited for Naga to do the same then entered the basement. It was lit up like a Christmas tree, everything flashing and voices speaking from various parts of the system in multiple languages. What the hell happened here? Red lights flashing, alarms shrieking. Bad news.

But that wasn't as important as finding our mate. If she was down here, we'd do damage control. Anything, as long as she was unharmed.

"Jasmine?" I called. "Mate, are you here?"

"Over here," she replied in a weak voice. "Behind all the broken stuff."

Chapter Twenty

Jasmine

The broken stuff...yeah, I probably broke about a million dollars' worth of equipment in my panicked attempt to get away. From the spies. Who were my mates. As I lay under the heap of steel and plastic and glass, I could feel the wetness of blood on my arm and forehead, but I couldn't tell how much I was injured. Maybe I'd bleed to death before they found me. And maybe that was preferable to the humiliation of explaining where my brain had gone.

Why hadn't I trusted them? Sure, I'd walked into a room full of computer equipment I didn't understand, but they worked in cybersecurity. And of course they couldn't give me a lot of details. They'd opened their home to me and trusted me as much as anyone could outside of their specific working contracts, and awesome me had to push the edge of the envelope and sneak around.

Who was the spy here? Maybe Bluebeard had it right. No, that was the concussion talking. Murdering all your mates or wives in cold blood and stashing them in a room was bad. For sure. Ugh!

If I could take that last half hour back or however long it was, I would give anything. Cancel the bet. I'd find a way to pay off my debts eventually through hard work and determination. But I'd never find two men like these again, and when they found me, if I was still alive, they'd dump me so fast, my head spun even more than it already was. Damn. No wonder I hadn't met anyone before now. I'd just have screwed it up.

Trying to find an escape hatch, I'd spotted what I thought was a hole in the wall beneath a table holding five hundred pounds or more of electronic stuff—or at least that was my estimation now. I'd rushed over to it, alarms ringing and red lights flashing all around me. Those damn multiple-language voices shouting out their alerts or whatever they were saying, and in all the chaos, I missed spotting the only cord not carefully bound and tucked away and tripped. Next thing I knew, I was under all this, so I'd probably blacked out for a moment. Or longer. How did a person estimate how long they were unconscious? The clocks on the wall had all those different times, making me even more confused.

Next time I opened my eyes, I heard my name so I replied, hoping it was one of the guys. The chaos had not slowed or silenced, so I couldn't be sure, but hopefully any bad guys or gals who wanted to break in did not know my name.

I was the bad girl in this scenario anyway.

Then it all went quiet, and ordinary office lighting replaced the red flashing. The odd voices stilled, leaving only one.

"Jasmine." It was Drake. I wasn't sure if it had been him the first time. "Jasmine, Naga is coming to find you. Stay very still, please. From what we can tell, you're in a precarious situation with a lot of heavy things balanced above you."

"A lot of heavy things already hit me."

"This is much more." He spoke in a calm voice, but his words told me how serious it was. "Naga is going to deal with it, try to work things around and make it safe for me to get you out, all right?"

"Yes."

"You're staying still?"

"Yes I, ahhh!" A spiked head followed by a long spiked body appeared through an opening between table legs and broken glass. "Help me! There's something here."

"Don't move! It's only Naga. His serpent form. And he's going to help."

"He's green and has spikes all over him? You're sure that's him?"

Despite the situation, Drake's tone held humor. "Yes, and I'm purple in my serpent form. Why? Did you think there were other serpents around here?"

I tried to stifle my damned cough, but it broke out and rattled some of the things around me.

"Mate? If you can just stop for a minute and let Naga stabilize things, please? I know you can't help it, usually, but if you can maybe take slow breaths or think pleasant thoughts?"

I was facing a pretty scary serpent with round pupils and... "Those spikes?"

"Yes, mate?"

"Are they poisonous?"

"No, not in our families at least. Hang in there. We'll get you out."

"I'm sorry I did this. It's all my fault."

“Not sure about that, but either way, we have to save you then try to figure out what to tell the insurance company.”

“That’s not funny.” I coughed a little less, but the faint laugh didn’t really help. “I’m scared.”

The green spiky serpent paused what he was doing, presumably stabilizing the equipment all around and over me, to gently nuzzle my arm. To my amazement, all I felt was love and other good feelings flowing from him.

“I’m not so scared now.” But why? “I don’t understand.”

“If Naga touched you, he did that. He has the ability to take away negative emotions.”

“Do you have a skill?”

“Yes, but it’s more about being a hot lover.”

The serpent next to me hissed, and Drake chuckled. “My serpent can read people and see if they are telling the truth.”

Oh gods. And they still wanted me around?

But this wasn’t a good time to ask any more questions. I just tried to stay unmoving and let the serpent known as Naga use the hand I hadn’t even noticed he had to shift things around until Drake could reach in and get hold of me and drag me out. Unfortunately they were unable to save the equipment that tumbled down the second I was out of there.

I was, but... “Naga? Is he still in there?”

“Not sure.” Tightness covered his tone now. He settled me in a chair across the room from the disaster I created and went back to find his friend.

If anything happened to Naga, it would be entirely my fault and I’d never forgive myself. Looking down, blood dripped over my eye, and I swiped at it only to see a series of cuts on my arm and a jagged piece of glass sticking out of one. But I would sacrifice anything to see the kind serpent shifter and his beautiful animal reappear well and whole.

Chapter Twenty-One

Naga

Being a fifteen-foot-long serpent had a lot of advantages. Especially when you still had the arms our snakish brother had absorbed millions of years ago. I'd used my hands to move things enough for Drake to get in and save our mate, but she must have been bracing something because the second she was gone, it all tumbled to the floor in a very expensive mess. Keeping Jasmine out of here had been a very good idea, but maybe not primarily for the reasons we thought. I grasped the edge of a stainless steel table and propelled myself forward and away from the worst of it all. My tail was caught, however, between a monitor and a desk drawer, pinched tight.

"Naga, you okay?" Drake was just on the other side of the heap of electronics.

"Yeah, but I'm trying to free my tail. How is Jasmine?"

"She's going to need some first aid, for sure. Mostly she's worried about you."

"Did you ask her what happened?" I dug my back toes between the drawer and monitor, struggling for leverage.

"Can I get in there and help you?"

"No, I don't think so. Hang back." I counted to three in my head and lunged forward, freeing my tail and slamming my head into the wall in front of me. "I'm out but, ow."

"Sorry, friend—" Crash and tinkle of whatever remained of the equipment our mate had brought down interrupted whatever he intended to say, and I climbed over the mess before shifting back into human form and finding my pants on the desk chair where I'd left them. Drake and I turned away from the disaster. We needed to take care of our mate.

And she was looking sad. "It's all my fault. Did I already say that?"

"It doesn't matter, although we're going to want to hear what happened later." I crouched beside her to examine her wounds.

"Can I pay for what broke?"

"No...gonna say no." Not unless she was a secret millionaire. "Can you hold out your arm so Naga can see it?"

“There’s glass in it.”

Hell if there wasn’t. She had a shard sticking right out of it, deeply embedded enough that I didn’t want to touch it, and Drake agreed. Our girl needed a trip to the human ER located a convenient hour and a half away. I helped her up the stairs while Drake made sure nothing was plugged in that was likely to cause a fire or other hazard. Of course, Jasmine did not want to go anywhere in torn, blood-soaked clothing, but I assisted her to clean the blood away from her minor wounds and covered them with gauze then dressed her in a loose tee, easing it past the glass, and clean shorts.

She even managed to make me shift, just for long enough for her to get a look at my serpent and for him to get to see her with his own eyes. Nobody ever petted him before. Or called him beautiful. He loved it.

We were back home twelve hours later, something Jasmine told us was pretty typical of human emergency rooms, especially those that served a broad rural area and was understaffed. The doctors and nurses did their very best but they were “only human.” Jasmine had stitches in her forehead and arm and some sort of scan to check for concussion. We’d teased her that if she was only a shifter, she could have saved all those hours by simply shifting and healing that way. She was good enough to laugh about the whole thing, but we had a lot of talking to do and not that night because she’d been through a lot. We slept with her only at her insistence because we were so afraid of hurting her—but our serpents would never have let us leave her either, so we’d have sat on the floor watching over her otherwise.

Sometime during the night, Jasmine woke up and wanted to talk. It was a huge relief to clear the air between us, and so we lay together in bed, holding our mate tenderly in our arms, and listened to the whole story that began with, “I was at my friend’s wedding.” It turned out, she’d only met us as part of a bet that she could keep her heart from growing attached, and with everything in me I wanted to be mad, to feel insulted, but my serpent listened beneath the words. *She was lonely. She needed us. Our mate found us, and it doesn’t matter how.*

Nothing about how she’d behaved in all the time she was here was cold or unemotional but before we mated her, we needed to know one thing. “Jasmine, are you going to win the bet?” I asked.

“I lost it the moment I set eyes on you two in video chat. I’m going to tell my friends they can keep their money whether you are willing to

forgive me and keep me or not.” She chewed on her lower lip. “After I finish paying off my student loans, I’ll start paying off the destruction downstairs.”

“Jasmine, we can pay for all your loans and we have insurance for the equipment. Are you saying you want to stay?”

“Yes, but not at your expense. I’ll concede to whatever the insurance covers, but I want to pay the deductible and my own debts, or it’s no deal.” She reached past me for her phone on the nightstand. “If we are in agreement, I will tell my friends the bet is off and I lost.” She grinned at my friend then at me, her stitched-up forehead doing nothing to detract from her beauty. “So...deal?”

Our arms closed around her from either side, and we showed her how we felt about that deal. We made slow gentle love to her, being very careful not to hurt her, but ending with marking her on either side of her throat. She joked that the wounds she’d gotten from our equipment were likely to leave marks anyway, but we were proud to tell her that a little research had shown us a couple of things.

Cuddling her close, Drake said, “First, turns out serpents only mark if they feel like it. Your scent had already mingled with ours, and we were mated. We weren’t sure, and that’s what had us making a few calls. Our parents didn’t want to talk about “private things,” but our siblings were glad to share. They also told us that while you can’t shift and heal like we can, you do get some better healing ability and likely won’t scar. Also, you probably will live as long as we do.”

She tilted her head to the side as I nibbled her new mark. “How long is that?”

“Long time.” I kissed my way up to her ear and murmured, “Much longer than the average human. So we won’t have to spend decades missing you.”

“I do feel much better already,” she mused. “I think the marking did help.”

“What do our brothers know?” I growled, rolling her on her side, facing me and lifting her leg onto my hip. “Tell us if you feel pain or want to stop. You were badly injured.”

“I coughed a lot, too,” she said.

“You’re not coughing now,” Drake put in, lying behind her and reaching between her legs to bring her wetness to her back hole. “Aren’t

you nervous?”

“No.” Jasmine worked her leg higher, opening herself wider to us.

“Horny, but not nervous.”

“And maybe a little naughty?” I laughed and pushed inside then stopped, waiting for Drake to stretch her wide enough to join me in the rear. We’d promised to do this one day, and there was no better time I could think of. She was always tight, but with my friend sharing her body, she was impossibly so.

“Not naughty, but maybe very bad.” She moaned, tossing her head and shivering all over.

“No, I think very good.” Drake gave me a nod and we began to move in tandem. Pacing ourselves as best we could. It wasn’t going to be long, for sure, but our mate couldn’t be left behind. Her sheath tightened around me as she found her climax, and Drake’s shout followed. My cum shot into her in jets, and then we all lay in a heap, kissing and breathing hard.

After a few minutes, Drake said, “Jasmine, weren’t you going to call your friends?”

She giggled. “Yes, but I don’t know what happened to my phone.”

Epilogue

Jasmine

We did find my phone, but by the time we did, we'd gotten distracted again and I didn't call my friends for about an hour. At this rate, I was going to need a vacation from all this mating. Not that I wanted to take a break. I couldn't get enough of these men, and their loving. Did that first time with both of them inside my body hurt?

More than I'd ever let them know, but was it worth it?

Yes. And the next time, it was much more comfortable but equally as hot.

And then they insisted I move to the bedroom next to mine. It was the main suite, gorgeous and with room for all of us.

Anything they wanted to do, I was there for it, new experiences all the time.

My friends had sneakily paid off my student loans as soon as I downloaded the app and refused to take anything in return. Anya claimed that in their minds, this was how I won the bet and wanted to know when they could come to visit. Thinking of my mates' line of work, I suggested we all rent a big house at a lake next summer together...all us mated couples. Michelle and her hubby too.

It felt good, talking about couple things for once, even if we were a threesome. But the girls thought that was extra great and only gave me a little grief over my refusal to have a big white wedding so they could be bridesmaids. I didn't need that, our mating everything I could ever dream of. I'd spent enough time and energy at weddings for a lifetime. Much more fun to spend a week swimming and sunning and riding Jet Skis and everything that made lake vacations fun.

But for now, I had another project. My shifters had managed to get me a security clearance so I could be part of the company. I didn't know much yet, and I mostly still did my own work, but the clearance and adding my name to the business enabled me to work in the basement without anyone complaining about my seeing their work. Yes, they did cybersecurity, but it was actually more intelligence analysis, which explained the secrecy even more. No wonder they spent the week after the keypad entry failed on the

basement upgrading. Now we had to use a retina scan to get in, and they also added solar panels and batteries to keep us from being subject only to a generator. It was great, but for some reason, it just never kicked on. More fail-safes were the way to go.

I didn't know how they did it because I didn't have the background or knowledge, but I finally decided it was not because of anything I had done but because I hadn't done anything wrong. And my desk was right in the corner where I'd landed after tripping over a cord and causing all that damage. My first week's salary paid the deductible for the insurance and after that, it all just went into a savings account for travel and other fun adventures.

Not bad for a girl who only months before was always a bridesmaid and never a bride. Now, I was a mate, in love with two males who made me feel like a princess every day of my life, and I did my best to show them how much I loved and appreciated them in return. My heart was so full I didn't know how I'd stand any more happiness, but I had a little something to tell my guys when they got back from town.

And I was pretty sure they'd be the best daddies ever.

An Excerpt From *Delivered to My Dragons*



Leaving my abusive ex seemed like the hardest thing I'd ever go through...until I learn I am carrying his baby. He is always on my tail. Discovering my new phone numbers. Parking his car outside my apartment. Trolling my social media. And I swore last night, I smelled his cheap cologne when I walked in from work. He cannot learn about the pregnancy. It could mean both our lives.

My parents are dead. My friends can't protect me. I need some help. My ex was a bear shifter, and I knew that the only creature that could take him out was a dragon. Two dragons would be even better.

But dragons are possessive, and finding one who would take me as a mate while I carry another male's baby would be a challenge. Two of them? Nearly impossible. The Mail-Order Matings app might be my only chance. And at this point? It's find a dragon, or wait around for Killian to murder me.

Delivered to My Dragons is Book 13 in the super sweet with building heat Mail-Order Matings Series. Delivered to My Dragons features a female who doesn't believe in the paranormal, two dragons who are being asked to take on a responsibility not theirs, and the new life at the center of it all. And of course, Mazzy promises a happy ever after. If you like true mates,

*Fate taking a hand, adorable babies, and fiery dragon shifters, one-click
Delivered to My Dragons today.*

Chapter One

Iris

“Order up!” I jump both internally and externally, and try to contain my surprise as much as possible. Gods, there was a time when I didn’t sprint to the heavens at every loud noise but not anymore.

“I’ve got it, Bessie,” I called out after scanning the diner as the bell above the door rang.

I picked the noisiest place to work on the planet. Or perhaps it chose me.

I delivered a huge stack of pancakes to a table of two young women who had already gotten their savory breakfast items and were talking over iced coffees. “Here you go, ladies. Right off the griddle.”

“Thank you.” Unlike some of the customers who came into Bessie’s Diner, these two were polite and hadn’t given me shit for bringing their breakfast out in stages.

I grabbed the bus tub and gathered the dishes from the next table over. With Bessie’s famous giant pancakes, the tabletops were endlessly sticky, but I’d gotten used to washing my hands a hundred times a day or more without complaint. When I ran out of gas in front of her diner, Bessie let me stay in the tiny apartment above the diner for free.

If the only thing I had to fuss about were sticky tables, then I considered myself blessed.

“Where did she find her mate again?” one of the young women I’d waited on just moments ago asked the other. The word mate crawled down my spine like black sludge. I couldn’t even remember the last time Killian had called me my name. He called me “mate,” my station in his life instead of a person. Perhaps that helped him stay cold to the things he did to me.

“The Mail-Order Mating app...” the woman said. “I actually downloaded it.”

“Let me see.” I peeked over the connecting booth at the app before she handed her phone over.

“Amber said you can put anything on there and they will find a mate for you. Or more.”

A gasp from the second girl. "A harem? Damn, I want to be a harem's princess."

They shared a giggle over that.

"There are females who get on here for research purposes. Widows. Breeders. Orcs. Grizzlies. You name it. I've heard there are even dragon shifters."

Dragons. My ex had been one of the largest, most malicious alpha bears in the nation. He kept me from all the pack's business since I was human. I couldn't help but overhear his end of phone conversations or his visitors who knocked on our door in the middle of the night. I'd learned his pack wasn't doing well and was constantly attacked and sabotaged.

If he treated his pack as he did me, it was no wonder they were in turmoil.

"Table three," Bessie yelled, a bit softer this time. She saw me at my worst the night I'd arrived here. Not a shred of dignity or self-worth. Chased until I had nothing left. When I turned, tub on my hip full of dishes, she winked at me. The softer tone had been on purpose. Bessie hired all kinds of women and men who had fallen on hard times, and I was no exception.

I picked up the order and delivered it to a pair of construction workers. One still wore his hard hat while ordering until his buddy reminded him. They got a belly laugh from that.

Once I gave them their food and delivered the ketchup I'd forgotten, I went to the back and sat on a stool, in view of the patrons. No matter what I did, I always had one eye on the front door.

"Dogs barkin'?" Bessie tipped her chin at my secondhand tennis shoes. I'd left my last apartment with nothing but the clothes on my back and barely a half tank in my tiny Corolla. She'd loaned me some money to get some clothes, and I paid her back in tips the next week.

"Always." I laughed.

"You don't look as green today," she added, scraping her gigantic metal spatula against the griddle, sliding the bits and pieces off into the hole in the front and to the trash can.

"No." I moved my hand to my belly instinctually. "Little man is giving me a break, it seems."

"You've got a bit of a break now. Get some of that French toast in you." She pointed to a plate of French toast piled with strawberry and

blueberry compote. Bessie might've been a short-order cook, but she was classically trained. Her hollandaise sauce was beyond divine, and so was her compote. She added a bit of cinnamon and nutmeg to it, along with some chia seeds. There was nothing better, but the cub inside me hadn't permitted breakfast in a few weeks.

While I ate at the round table in the back, I downloaded the app the girls had been talking about, simply out of curiosity. My new station wouldn't last. There were already signs of Killian and his pack on my trail, and the car parked outside the diner with its brights on was one I had seen before. While I couldn't make out the person inside, the car belonged to one of his betas.

My time in this place and maybe on this Earth was fleeting.

Once Killian decided to come for his prey instead of playing with me, I might not breathe ever again.

That was, unless the cub inside me saved me from his wrath.

That wrath was why I'd left him in the first place. No way in hell I was going to give that asshole another punching bag, and especially not a child of mine.

The young women had been right. There were all kinds of mating situations highlighted on the app. Monsters seeking breeders. Monsters seeking mates. Shifters seeking one mate. Two mates. Multiple mates. Humans seeking shifters. Humans seeking monsters. Some looking for someone to turn them into a shifter. Latent shifters. This place was the hub for anyone seeking a mate, and for a myriad of reasons.

Dragons could protect me from Killian and his entire pack with one blow of fire from their mouths.

While I finished my food, I signed up for the app, making my intentions clear. The last thing I wanted was to enter into a setup, mating with dragons thinking I was trying to manipulate them.

Human female, pregnant from ex mate, seeks two dragon mates for protection and mating.

"Mind bussing those tables?" Bessie asked, chuckling as she looked over my shoulder.

"Or are you looking at dragon porn?"

I pushed the phone into my pocket after posting my note on my profile. There were a ton of questions I hadn't answered, but I would do that later.

After my shift was over, I ate the meatloaf and mashed potatoes Bessie served up for me and showered. The hot water poured over my body, loosening my muscles a bit, but I wouldn't ever really relax until my little one and I were safe or Killian was dead.

Then I settled in to finish my profile. I hit the complete button with a little prayer to any god who might be listening. I needed a safe haven for me and my young.

Before I fell asleep, there was a call on my phone. Tears ran down my face as I reached for it. A number I knew well flashed on the screen of the burner phone bought at a gas station.

He was already here, and his hunt had begun.

Chapter Two

Phoenix

I ran my hand over my shortish mohawk once we stepped inside our lair and breathed out a long sigh.

My dragon was most himself at home, and so were we.

“You know what’s crazy?” Keir said, setting down his bags neatly in a row, by size, the largest at his feet. “When we’re home, I’m itching to go fly or go on a new job and then, a week into the job, my dragon wants to go home. Can’t win with the beast inside me.”

“Same here.” I kicked off my shoes and removed my suit jacket. The other thing I liked about being home? Not having to wear much. My dragon ran hot and, even in human form, my body stayed at a higher temperature than even most shifters. We wore the suits because of our profession, but the damned things made a trickle of sweat run down my back, in even the most wintery of places.

Keir picked up my shoes and his and placed them into the organizer by the front door. “I’m starving. Should we cook, or you want to order in?”

He already knew the answer. My dragon wasn’t fond of eating out, and especially not fast food. No matter how much we ate of it, we were never satisfied. “I can run out and get some steaks. Chops. Grill outside and save some of the cleanup.”

“I’ll go with you. You never pick up any good vegetables.”

I chuckled. “That’s because I hate vegetables. What’s the use in them anyway?”

He shook his head. “Fiber, my friend. Besides, if you add enough butter and garlic, they all taste good. Meet here in ten minutes. We’ll take the Land Rover.”

Our home had two wings off the main living areas and an upstairs suite. I glanced up at the landing, only accessible by a spiral staircase on either side. My wing was on the north side. A huge bedroom with an en suite, a closet, and spacious office. Keir’s was the same as mine, but he chose to have a larger closet and a smaller office. My office contained a mini theater, whereas his closet looked like it belonged to a fashion designer.

I tossed the bags onto my bed and made my way to the dresser. I would have to wear a shirt to the market, but that would be the end of it for my time at home. I picked out a pair of jeans and a black T-shirt with our logo on it and a pair of hi-top sneakers and put them on, cursing the suit in the process. Once I was dressed, I grabbed my sunglasses, wallet, and keys. If Keir thought he was driving my Land Rover, he had another thing coming.

When I left my wing, I saw Keir standing in the living room. He wasn't the type to play idly on his phone but instead, he stared at the upstairs of our home.

Upstairs was the mating suite.

It would be where we would spend our nights with our mates. Of course, we all had separate bedrooms because everyone needed private time, even mated throuples, but this very special suite remained empty.

Didn't even know why we built it in the first place. We selected a mate, but things had gone south, and since her, there had been no other.

We were happy and then heartbroken.

Dragons only had one fated mate as far as we knew. It had been almost ten years...

Why in the hell I still had hope for a mate was beyond understanding. I blamed it on my dragon.

The beast.

"Ready?" I asked, tearing Keir from his stare.

"Yes." We walked out to the kitchen and through the back door to the garage. Keir snatched my keys from my hand at the last second and jumped into the driver's seat. I could've stopped him, but as soon as I got home, my hackles were given permission to stand down.

I got into the passenger seat, noticing my best friend's smile. A win was a win, I supposed, and driving my truck wasn't something I normally let him do.

He liked clothes and order. I liked cars and movies.

"Do you have to be on that thing even when we're taking a trip?" he asked.

"I'm checking my emails. Calm down and drive. You're just hangry."

He snorted. "I am. I'm buying four of those tomahawk steaks. You can have one." He chuckled at himself.

"That's fine. I'll buy my own."

While I was scrolling, I noticed an ad at the top of my email. I clicked on it and read the reviews. An app that would match you to your fated mate.

I huffed out a laugh.

“What?” Keir asked. “What’s funny?”

“There’s an ad on my email. It’s an app that helps shifters and monsters find mates.”

He turned from the main highway into the parking lot. “Times have changed.”

When we parked, he turned to me. “Nix?”

“Our house is too fucking silent, Keir.” This ad, this spam communication had needled me right in the place that hurt the most. We had only had Rachel in our lives for a few weeks before she decided that another dragon, an alpha of a horde with more treasure, was a better mate for her. She said she never believed in all that fated mate stuff; we made our own destinies.

My beast needed a female in his life. Not only a mate but a friend and someone to come home to, or she could travel with us if she liked.

“I know, brother. It’s not for a lack of trying. My dragon looks for a mate in every female we encounter. He’s still looking for a companion for us, even though...”

Keir refused to speak Rachel’s name since the rejection. At first, I thought it juvenile but then, I realized it was simply a part of his self-defense against the hurt. He never spoke her name.

“Mine too. Maybe some meat will help,” I chuckled putting my phone away. The idea of the app had piqued my interest, but I would revisit it later.

He got out. “Yes. Meat always helps.”

About Mazzy J. March

Mazzy J. March is a fan of all things paranormal—shifters, vampires, witches...dragons and all the many creatures that inhabit the world beyond the ordinary. She has been plotting her Academy and RH stories for a long time and is thrilled to finally have them releasing and ever grateful to the readers who are offering such support and helping her dreams come true.

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